

**Experiences of freedom and personal growth in a  
community arts group for mental health:  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

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## Abstract

**Background:** The relationship between art and mental health has evolved from a main focus on art therapy to include community arts approaches with wider and more socially-based links to health. The proliferation of community arts approaches across the UK is not met, however, with a research focus that provides insight into the mechanisms by which the activity might contribute to improving mental health.

**Aims:** The aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the meaning of taking part in community arts for those with mental health problems and to learn about the process and ethos of group experience that was interpreted to form a necessary foundation for mental health benefit.

**Methods:** The community arts experience of six art group members was explored through semi-structured interviews (four of whom participated in a second round of interviews). Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

**Findings:** Community arts for mental health, in this particular study, span multiple aspects of participants' life contexts that were found to fall into two main aspects of meaning; that is, a sense of *freedom from expectation* and a trajectory of *personal growth*. When taken together, these two superordinate themes further represent the meaning of art group experience as a process whereby the art group culture can allow, and facilitate, positive change and long-term development.

**Conclusions:** The investigation of benefit and outcome in relation to community arts for mental health can only go so far in providing insight into the journey of participatory experience. Instead, this study's exploration of the meanings of art engagement within a group context goes beyond description of benefit to suggest a complex process whereby the 'ingredients' of the art group culture is pivotal to the role of community arts in improving the lives of those experiencing mental health problems. The journey of growth that was experienced by participants evokes important and complex questions for community arts in relation to public health goals, therapeutic approaches to improve mental health and concepts within mental health arenas, such as the nature of 'recovery.' Furthermore the study suggests a pivotal role for health psychology in sparking a collaborative dialogue about the learning that can be gained from community arts approaches, as well as in facilitating community arts in designing approaches to working with mental health groups that are based on the insightful reflections of those who engage in them.

## **Introduction**

The use of the arts in improving health has become a point of particular interest to health psychology given the multiple psychosocial mechanisms by which art and health have the potential to relate. One such mechanism – the use of community arts approaches in improving mental health – can be related to a positive health psychology focus on supporting people to live with, cope with and manage mental health problems; a shift from the traditional concept of ‘recovery’ as the reduction of symptoms and service-use to understanding the ways in which those with mental health problems can be supported by the communities around them. Community arts for mental health also add another dimension to the art-mental health relationship, which has traditionally been focused on art therapy, expressions of mental illness in psychiatry and a historical link between mental health problems and creativity ability.

Community arts for mental health are gaining credence with a wealth of activity set-up across the UK. Benefits to wellbeing have been cited and there is much discussion of community arts in terms of public health goals, yet there is a fundamental research gap in terms of understanding community arts for mental health from the perspective of those who attend them and the ways in which participants come to achieve benefits to attendance. This lack of focus on process, rather than outcome, means that the mechanisms by which community arts might achieve identified goals (such as social inclusion) are unclear and transfer of learning across projects is compromised.

This study aims to explore the experiential process of taking part in a community arts group for mental health in order to understand what community arts mean to those who engage in the process of activity. In addition to this idiographic focus on the context of individual lives, the study also aims to understand more about the context

and ethos of community arts as a group activity and the ways in which group experience might relate to individual meaning-making.

The thesis comprises four chapters. Chapter 1 – the literature review – outlines the relationship between the arts, health and mental health and describes the focus of research, to date, in the area. It also discusses the methodological challenges that researchers face in exploring the use of arts for health and ties together the gaps in understanding about community arts for mental health to provide a rationale for the aims of the study.

Chapter 2 then provides an in-depth description of the methodology that was chosen in relation to the research context and aims of the study. Appendix 1 supports the chapter in detailing a context exploration stage of the project before formal data was gathered, which was central to informing methodological decision-making. Chapter 3 is a presentation of the thematic findings and chapter 4 discusses the key messages from a look across the themes, linking the study to implications for health psychology and directions for future research. A process of participant experience is also diagrammatically proposed. Chapter 4 ends with the main conclusions of this study.

## **Chapter 1: Literature review**

This chapter begins by introducing the links between art and health and outlining recent lines of debate that have emerged from suggestions and attempts to integrate the two disciplines as a method of health improvement. As one of the longest-standing areas where a significant relationship between the arts and health can be identified, the more specific link between mental health and the arts is then explored within the context of health psychology, public health and changing ideologies about mental health. In particular, the movement from art therapy approaches to community-based arts in mental health is identified as having an interesting congruence with the psychosocial focus of health psychology, including the historical shift to look at aspects of positive psychology and active self-management of mental health problems. Within this focus, the role of community arts for mental health in promoting social inclusion and tackling social exclusion is also introduced.

The second section of this chapter then looks at the benefits of community arts to mental health, with a prevailing argument that there is a significant lack of research into the experience and process of community arts from the perspective of those who attend. There is some focus in the literature on the benefits of community arts to mental health and wellbeing outcomes across physical health contexts, yet little focus is given specifically to those who suffer from mental health problems. Furthermore, the research is largely outcome-focused with a lack of experiential exploration of the meaning of outcomes to personal lives and the context in which outcomes come to be attained. It is argued here that the group-based nature of community arts is an interesting dimension when considering personal experience, with the possibility of collective meanings of community arts interacting with individuality. Understanding the contribution of community arts to mental health therefore necessitates an exploration of group contexts in order to gain comprehensive insight into individual experience.



The debates inherent in investigating community arts for mental health through research are then discussed in the final section of this chapter, outlining the methodological challenges that result from an underlying philosophical difference between art and health approaches. Against the backdrop of a 'need' for evidence are fundamental questions in relation to what constitutes 'evidence' in relation to arts approaches and the incongruence of measuring outcomes against goals when community arts often deliberately attempt to move away from a focus on outcome. This section concludes with an argument that a qualitative research lens is most suitable to looking at aspects of process, staying true to the design of community arts itself and providing insight into experience and context of community arts for mental health that is overwhelmingly lacking in the current literature.

### **1.1 The relationship between community arts, health and mental health**

Opportunities for engagement between health psychology and the arts have become a focus in recent years. The *Journal of Health Psychology* (2008; 13) dedicated a whole issue to the topic by exploring some of the theoretical and empirical linkages that are thought to present a compelling, yet controversial, argument for the integration of arts into health psychology. There are novel links postulated in terms of using art to engage people in health and as a platform, or method, for communicating learning from studies in a way that might be more accessible to lay audiences. Furthermore, it is hypothesised that art can be used as a method of communication, or a tool to aid communication, in clinical and research settings (Murray & Gray, 2008). Across different points of intersect between health psychology and the arts is the general conceptualisation of the arts in two inter-related ways; as "aesthetic objects" and as a set of "creative processes" (Thomas & Mulvey, 2008; 240). In this sense, both the products of art and the processes of being involved in art are seen as opportunities for interaction with health psychology.

The integration of arts into health psychology, however, is not without debate. When considering an art-health relationship, a fundamental question is evoked about 'what health psychology is' and whether the arts can be part of its remit (Murray & Gray, 2008). This is reflective of a wider debate about whether arts, in general, can impact on health. An article in the British Medical Journal by the editor (Smith, 2002; 1432) brought this issue to academic light by advocating that the British Government "*spend (slightly) less on health and more on the arts.*" The argument, by Smith, is that diverting 0.5% of the UK health budget to the arts might offer a way forward for those health issues where medicalisation and medical treatment often fail. The article suggests that issues such as unhappiness, loneliness and tiredness can be more efficiently addressed through the arts if health is about more than the absence of disease. From a widely agreed upon perspective that health is a broad construct, it is argued that the arts may play a pivotal role:

*"If health is about adaptation, understanding, and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything that medicine has to offer."* (Smith, 2002; 1433)

Polarised responses to the article from the health community were evident, moving between views that fundamentally separated art from health (e.g. perceptions of art as a luxury rather than a health endeavour) and those who saw the integration potential as a refreshing way forward (Putland, 2008).

These recent academic debates, however, do not represent the length of the relationship between art and health. In particular, the notion of a link between participation in arts and mental health has a long history with a trajectory that shows differences between historical and current understandings of the art-mental health relationship. Parr (2006; 152) highlights that historical uses of artwork by people with mental health problems were seen as "expressions and evidence of difference,"

particularly distinguishing between 'madness' and rationality. Insanity and creative ability have long been intertwined, with imaginative capacity being linked to the characteristics of both. Furthermore, the therapeutic benefits of using arts in mental health became formally recognised in the nineteenth century when artistic expressions were used to interpret the unconscious mind. Since then, various forms of art have been used in therapeutic endeavours (Stickley et al, 2007).

Parr (2006) argues that the use of art as therapy represents a reconfiguration of the art-mental health relationship. Whereas art was previously used to categorise difference, therapeutic approaches have the potential to *minimise* difference through helping to ensure communication, inclusion and recovery from mental health problems. Parr describes these historical positions as representing 'outsider' and 'insider' art; the former representing art that was produced and used within psychiatric institutions and the latter representing the drive within the psychiatric community to bring art into therapeutic intervention. More recently, however, there has been growing interest in the mental health arena towards more socially oriented, community-based, art initiatives. These are known simultaneously as 'arts-in-health', 'community arts for health' and 'arts-for-health' projects, carried out by practicing artists from a range of backgrounds as opposed to art therapists (Wilson & Goldie, 2006). Rather than having a specific therapeutic intent, such initiatives are usually designed to promote both individual and community level health and wellbeing at a more general level (Putland, 2008).

A focus on wellbeing means that community arts can be related to the movement towards positive health psychology, which strives to understand the mechanisms by which positive health outcomes can be experienced. In relation to mental health, a positive psychology focus looks at the ways in which people successfully cope with mental health issues; a shift from the traditional medical focus on attempting to

understand areas of deficit and malfunction (Beresford, 2002). This focus links with health agendas on preventative health and anticipatory care that are aimed at reducing the number of people that are in need of support from specialist mental health services (Wilson & Goldie, 2006). Traditionally, however, there has been more research focused on the experience of mental illness than there has been on the experiential impact of interventions (Newton et al, 2007).

A positive health psychology focus is therefore lacking in terms of how people live with, cope with, and manage mental health problems, yet it could be a particular point of intersect between community arts, health psychology and mental health. This resonates with Putland's (2008; 267) call for a "community of interest rather than a recognisable sector" when it comes to exploring the relationship between arts and health. It is argued that our understanding of the links and mechanisms between art and health is largely underdeveloped and is likely to remain so unless there is a new multidisciplinary approach that is able to develop a "shared language" that facilitates dialogue about the interests and values of arts for health. This premise is already discussed within the context of art-based research practices where "going further with qualitative research" to include the arts as research methods is seen as disruptive of disciplinary boundaries of existing research paradigms (Leavy, 2009; 257).

A multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the art-health relationship can be related to the drive to break-down some of the disciplinary boundaries in psychology. Divisions in disciplines, although pragmatic, are also seen as problematic and restrictive. Smith (2004) argues that much of the liveliest work in health psychology is social-cognitive, which is seen to point to a need to cross territory. In relation to community arts for mental health, Kapitan (2008; 2) questions why collective approaches have to be categorised as fundamentally different to art therapy and calls for the art therapy profession to broaden its narrative to explore the potential benefits

of those practices deemed as “not art therapy.” In this sense, it is argued that there needs to be less of a focus on categorisation and instead an exploration of how traditional links between art and health (including art therapy) can integrate new ways of working. Multi-disciplinary approaches to understanding concepts of health, however, can be challenging in their blurring of the boundaries between ideologies and approaches, as well as their differential focus on individual and social aspects of health (Putland, 2008). This can be related to community arts where no clear description of what a community arts approach ‘looks like’ is apparent in the literature. Instead, community arts for health can be seen as an umbrella term that houses a range of art activities across varied settings.

Rather than being described in terms of their overall characteristics, community arts are therefore often described in relation to what they are *not*. The natural comparison is art therapy, which has been described as representing the ‘other end’ of the spectrum to community arts (Wilson & Goldie, 2006). The point on which they are conceptualised to differ is the focus of therapy on the individual and community arts on collective and social dimensions of art participation (White, 2006). Kapitan (2008; 2) suggests that *“something happens when the narrative of the [art therapy] profession shifts from the individual expert to the living reality and power of the collective.”* Stickley et al (2007) also suggest that a move away from using art as therapy is a democratic shift that positions the healing of creativity within the individual rather than between the individual and therapist. In this sense, the shift towards community arts is not just a move away from the individual to the collective, but a move *towards* the individual in terms of where the power for recovery lies.

‘Recovery’ is an integral component of literature on mental health problems, yet it permeates discussion without any clear consensus about “what people are recovering from, what the process of recovery is, or what the outcomes of recovery should be.”

(Spandler et al, 2007; 792). Traditionally, 'recovery' was seen as evidenced by the reduction of somatic symptoms and need for medical and social services (Heenan, 2006); however, it has been conceptualised by those with mental health problems as a difficult process of personal growth, which is a journey rather than an end point and a transformative process in which the sense of self gradually changes to incorporate a sense of purpose beyond mental health symptoms (Van Lith et al, 2011). A more holistic and positive concept of 'recovery' may build on traditional conceptualisations to also include the notion of 'hope,' which is thought to be able to unite narrower concepts of recovery into a more multidimensional construct (Spandler et al, 2007).

A reconceptualisation of the concept of 'recovery' from mental health problems evidently incorporates a focus on social dimensions of mental health experience, particularly if developments in a sense of self (which includes identity as a social, as well as, personal construct) are a necessary part of the process (Stickley et al, 2007). The collective focus on community arts as a group experience may therefore tap into this premise. The use of the arts in promoting social goals, however, is not new. Since the late 1960's, community arts projects have been delivered to various groups including schools, hospitals, prisons, and housing schemes. As well as improving accessibility to arts, community arts have historically tried to reflect a community of interest and have been linked to campaigns on social issues of health, housing and environment. Therefore, the social role of community arts in the context of mental health is not just their position within a social context, but in their proposed, and increasing, role in achieving wider public health objectives that challenge dominant mental health ideologies. The role of the arts in developing social capital and promoting social inclusion is a primary focus (Hamilton et al, 2005; Stickley et al, 2007).

Hacking et al (2006; 122 ) argue that tackling exclusion *"involves removing structural barriers to participation in society for excluded groups"* whereas promoting inclusion is

about *“a radical shifting of social attitudes towards difference, rather than simply attempting to enable people to fit into an unwelcoming society.”* Useful reference is made to differences between bonding capital and bridging capital in social capital theory; whereas bridging capital involves connections with people unlike ourselves in the wider community, bonding capital is described as connection among people who share similar characteristics. It is thought that bridging capital is more likely to promote social inclusion, but that bonding capital may be influential in progressing people, as a first step, towards achieving other outcomes. One of the ways of achieving both might be for projects to work with people from the wider community as well as those with mental health problems (Hacking et al, 2006).

It is largely accepted, however, that despite social drives, dominant ideologies about mental health still largely prevail (Heenan, 2006). Beresford (2002; 581) argues that;

*“It is difficult to think of any other area of medicine, let alone thought or practice more broadly, where prevailing understandings have remained so long glued to their nineteenth century origins.”*

In result, it is argued that people with mental health problems remain amongst the most socially excluded groups in the UK (Heenan, 2006). Furthermore, and despite the proposed links between community arts and social goals, Hamilton et al (2003, p 189) argue that *“the evidence that art promotes public health and promotes social inclusion remains elusive.”* In relation, there is a lack of discussion in the literature about *how* community arts projects relate to social goals in mental health. The general mechanism cited in is that they increase community relationships, which, in turn, can positively affect wellbeing and health (Argyle & Bolton, 2005); however, it is unclear whether the notion of ‘community relationships’ is about bridging capital or bonding capital, or both. Interestingly, Hacking et al (2006) found that community arts projects did not

commonly identify social inclusion as a goal in the first place. This begs a fundamental question about the translation of public health goals down to projects ‘on the ground’ and whether community arts projects actually see themselves as working towards a public health agenda.

Understanding the translation of goals, and process of community arts in general, requires insight into how community arts projects conceptualise their purpose, and, crucially, the way that art projects are experienced by participants regardless of how projects intend themselves to be experienced. This can be seen to be reflective of a modern patient-led NHS that requires greater efforts to listen to the voices of service users (Isherwood et al, 2007; Reid et al, 2005). In mental health in particular, UK government initiatives suggest that the perspectives of service users should be central to service design (Newton et al, 2007). As the following section now discusses, however, there is an overall lack of research into community arts, which means that the perspective of service users remain under-explored when it comes to understanding the nature of participation and community arts as an approach to mental health problems.

### **1.2. Research on community arts for mental health**

In reflection of the current focus on positive and psychosocial aspects of health experience, there has been a proliferation of community-based art initiatives within the UK. The psychosocial influence of such art activity, however, has received little research attention outside of the art therapy literature (Hamilton et al, 2003; Hacking et al, 2006) and the benefits to be gained from socially oriented art initiatives are described as “relatively neglected ” (Argyle, 2003; 4). White (2006) found that evaluations of community-based arts are mostly found in unpublished literature; for example, on the websites of art organisations. Such studies demonstrate great diversity across projects in terms of both art activity and research activity, posing both methodological and



theoretical challenges for gaining a higher abstraction of knowledge about community arts. This thesis therefore focuses on the contribution of published, peer-reviewed, research to the specific area of community arts for mental health.

Of the few published studies that look at community arts, as opposed to art therapy, there has been an exciting recent focus on different physical health contexts, such as cancer (Reynolds & Prior, 2006; Reynolds & Lim, 2007) and chronic illness (Reynolds, 2002; Reynolds & Prior, 2003). Few studies, however, have been conducted within a specific mental health context. Furthermore, the learning that can be gained from the limited research is problematic due to sampling approaches. All studies are qualitative and most draw on participants from; 1) different art settings (only some of which constitute a community arts approach) or settings where it is not wholly explicit whether they constitute 'community arts;' 2) settings that are more explicitly described as community arts but where the perspectives of those with mental health problems are only partially represented amongst other groups that are not set-up for those with mental health problems.

In the first category, Stickley et al (2007) recruit participants from 'art workshop days' running within a mental health service. The duration of workshops is not provided and it is questionable whether this would constitute a collective community 'group,' although workshops were run by mental health nurses and not art therapists. Similarly, Heenan (2006) explores an "art as therapy" module, which is described as community-based (delivered through the voluntary sector by an artist and not an art therapist) but which is accessed through referral by mental health services. In the second category, Argyle (2003) recruited community arts participants from a single parent's support group, a teenage parent support group and a group where mental health problems were only partially representative of its membership.

The difficulty in drawing firm conclusions from these studies is related to the inability to make specific and detailed suggestions about the contribution of community arts as an approach to mental health that is distinguishable from other art endeavours and other health and social contexts. Although there is no clear definition of what community arts 'look like,' these studies could better detail their art settings in a way that might enable researchers to subjectively decide whether their own research settings are similar enough for comparison of findings. In time, this may lead to the ability to develop a typology of community arts approaches. Although the study draws comparisons between the findings and those of these studies later in chapter 4, it should therefore be noted that links can only be tentatively made.

The closest studies to looking specifically at community arts within a context that is specific to those with mental health problems are Van Lith (2011), Spandler et al (2007), Lawthom et al (2007) and Parr (2006). However, these studies also recruit participants from different groups. Val Lith et al (2011) explored the perceptions of participants from two psychosocial rehabilitation services engaged in a broad spectrum of art-based programmes. Spandler et al (2007) recruited participants from six diverse arts and mental health projects all involving those with mental health needs but in different contexts, such as severe and enduring mental health needs and an Asian woman's mental health organisation. Parr (2006) explored two community arts for those with severe and enduring mental health problems and Lawthom et al (2007) investigated a range of community-based projects.

Although differentially focused on different participant groups, and with varying ways of presenting their findings (some thematic and some more discursive with the need for the reader to interpret the main themes), studies can be interpreted as broadly similar in their findings that community arts provide benefits to wellbeing and facilitate a general ability to cope with mental health problems. There is an overall sense of

change and growth in relation to participants' wider life contexts. The individual ways in which studies categorise change into themes or discussion points, however varies across studies. Spandler et al (2007), for example, found that community arts gave participants a sense of purpose and meaning, enhanced coping strategies, an ability to rebuild their identity and a fostering of hope. Van Lith et al (2011), on the other hand suggests that community arts brought their participants a sense of balance and wellness, advantages (such as relaxation) from being absorbed in the creative process and benefits in relation to what the end product of art "gives back" to participants. Within evidence provided for categories, however, similarity can be made with other studies; for example, Van Lith partly evidences their balance and wellness theme with discussion of art giving their participants a reason to 'get out of bed, ' which can be linked with Spandler et al's themes on purpose and hope.

Perhaps part of the complexity of drawing particular areas of similarity and difference across studies is due to the fact that published research on community arts for mental health, to date, does not appear to have explored a particular group within a particular mental health setting. This means that there is a lack of understanding about the ways in which particular aspects of group set-up may impact on the experience of engaging in community arts. The identification of common themes across many qualitative research studies show that shared experiences are evident when a phenomenon is not group-based; however, a group activity (being experienced at the same point in time and by the same people) may encompass greater impact on collective meanings and the mechanisms of bonding capital. Furthermore, the lack of consensus on what actually constitutes a community arts approach means that by exploring a single group, the findings in relation to participatory experience can be attributed to the particular characteristics of that group. Studying a relatively un-explored phenomenon like community arts for mental health from the perspective of one particular group may lead to a greater general understanding of what community arts 'look like;' that is, on

the premise that it will be possible for subsequent studies to be conducted with other similar groups and to gradually make more general claims (Smith & Eatough, 2006).

In addition to a lack of specific focus on community arts for mental health, there is an evident lack of focus on the ways in which participants come to experience positive outcomes. In this sense, the research contributes to our understanding of the types of benefits that participants might come to attain, but fails to provide an explanatory insight into the process of art engagement. This seems ironic when the concept of 'process' permeates the literature on both community arts and mental health in terms of recovery from mental health problems, participation in community arts and the fundamental act of art-making. Engagement in community arts as being about a process of experience is hinted at in discussion of wellbeing outcomes that constitute the focus of research to date. Hacking et al (2006), for example, argues that wellbeing outcomes, like self-esteem, may represent progress or "distance travelled" towards higher-end health and social outcomes. In this sense, they may therefore be mediators of the relationship between community arts and health; however, this is a suggestion that is largely unexplored. In relation, White (2006; 129) suggests that we go a step back to *"understand better the processes of arts in health projects in order to posit the casual links that can result in health benefit to individuals and their communities."*

A focus on outcome and benefit, to date, also overlooks the experiential nature of community arts in terms of what engagement in the activity *means* to participants with mental health problems. Although this would include the meanings of experienced outcomes in terms of mental health benefits, it also relates to meaning more broadly in terms of engaging in the context and process of community arts. From a health psychology perspective, a lack of focus on meaning also seems ironic given that *"dealing with illness or returning to health necessarily involves engaging with meaning making"* (Murray & Gray, 2008; 150). In the context of mental health, the meaning of

experience can be seen as pivotal to understanding the ways in which community arts might contribute to the mental health recovery process that was defined earlier.

An exception to the lack of focus on process and meaning are the studies by Parr (2006) and Van Lith et al (2011), respectively. Parr (2006) suggests that community arts provide opportunities for benefits in relation to group processes and he explicates how findings like 'a sense of belonging' are inherently different to social inclusiveness and the idea of bridging social gaps. Van Lith et al (2011) focus on the meaning of community arts for mental health experience and offer interesting insights into how the art making process and context supports mental health recovery by engendering feelings of belonging, security, encouragement, and a sense connectedness. The following section now discusses why such studies may be lacking in the academic literature by outlining the methodological challenges that underpin research into community arts for health.

### **1.3 Methodological issues and challenges**

A general lack of academic analysis of the relationship between the arts and health is apparent. White (2006), however, argues that the growth in arts for health projects is attributable to an improving context for dialogue between art and health sectors. Putland (2008) goes further to identify some broad areas of discussion that have recently started to emerge. Most notably, a sense of tension exists between those who strive to provide 'evidence' of community arts benefits and those who voice concerns that evaluation against health outcomes reduces the value and meaning of the arts to "narrowly defined functions" where art is seen as merely instrumental to the outcomes prescribed. It is argued that the former argument represents more of a health perspective with regards to the interest in 'evidence' in the health sciences, whereas the latter is a response evoked from an 'arts' perspective that, although understands the need for evidence and looks for evidence itself, also points to the need to not lose

sight of the nature of art and its role in society (Putland, 2008; 266). Importantly, it is argued that such tensions or ‘gaps’ are not easily resolved simply through discussion and debate; rather, they represent a fundamental and complex situation where the arts and health sciences are perceived to be “intrinsically at odds” (Putland, 2008; 267). In this sense, debates are not just methodological but are reflective of deep-rooted philosophical differences in meaning, value and intent across disciplinary boundaries. Lawthom et al (2007) provides a contextualised example of this premise by describing the difficulties in relations between evaluators and artists in their study.

A need for ‘evidence’ in relation to community arts is linked strongly to the gradual shift in focus from the provision of services to the need to demonstrate accountability through outcome evaluation and attaining priority outcomes (Patton, 2002). This is reflective of the necessity to provide evidence of the benefits/limitations, value for money, and for the justification of funding, support, introduction and maintenance of art initiatives (Hamilton, et al, 2003). The way to generate such evidence, however, is also a source of complexity and contention, leading Hamilton et al (2003; 401) to argue that knowing *how* to generate evidence for the health impact of the arts constitutes “searching for the Holy Grail.” From a methodological viewpoint, debate exists over what actually constitutes an ‘evidence-base’ within the context of community arts. Related to this is the apparent difficulty that exists in adopting what is considered to be *appropriate* methodology.

The appropriateness of methodology is highlighted in the NICE (2002; 9) review of evaluation in community-based art for health where it is argued that report writers commonly comment on their “*uncertainty about how to carry out evaluation, what the most appropriate procedures are, and what types of evaluation will be acceptable to others.*” Acceptability relates to question over which methods will be deemed suitable and meaningful within an academic health community, particularly in areas where

positivist methods are still upheld as a gold standard. It also relates to the acceptability of methods to those carrying out the research; Putland (2008) identifies that limited resources and research skills amongst art programmes results in questions about whether research instruments and methodologies are used appropriately and whether there is sufficient clarity about study aims and the differences between process and outcome data. The danger of adopting methodologies that are seen as acceptable, both in terms of those 'required' by funders and those that require limited research expertise, is that the methods fit more with an 'ideal standard' and/or within the capabilities of individual projects than they do with the research questions.

In addition to the fundamental question of how community arts should be measured, there is uncertainty about *what* should be measured. There is a common acknowledgment that insufficient understanding exists about the outcomes that ought to be expected in the first place. This evidently relates to the 'newness' of the subject matter and the assumptions that would have to be made for hypothesis-testing when the mechanisms by which community arts operate still need to be explored and theorised (Hamilton et al, 2003). But even the fundamental concept of outcomes or 'goals' can be problematic. As Patton (2002) suggests, community approaches often conceptualise active involvement in a programme as a developmental process that can be seen as an end in itself. This differs from art within clinical settings that can link specific aspects of interventions to specific health outcomes.

Putland (2008) argues that the difficulty of knowing what to measure results from the wide-ranging focus that approaches based on public health models can take. In this sense, although a multifactorial approach to health is seen as a strength, it can also lead to confusion in determining and measuring outcomes as individual art programmes focus differentially on individual and social approaches to health. There is also inherent difficulty in linking outcomes to art activity with any degree of certainty

(Newman et al, 2003), particularly in a mental health context where participants may be engaged in other endeavours to address their mental health problems.

In addition to the methodological challenges of generating evidence of outcomes is the argument that the idea of 'measurement' is inherently incongruent with community arts in the first place (Newman et al, 2003; Putland, 2008). In specific relation to art experience, there is objection to the notion that arts should have to justify their existence through scientific methods, which are thought to contrast the very philosophy of art, and individualised experience. The prospect is often seen as "absurd" (Baum, 2001; 307) and "positivism gone mad" (Hamilton, 2005; 402). Newman et al (2003; 318) highlight that some artists fundamentally see quantification and categorisation as "hostile to the creative process," reflecting a deep-rooted difference in philosophical views between artists and researchers.

Although seen as an 'art perspective,' the notion of 'measurement' being unsuitable for researching community arts is also fundamentally linked to the quantitative/qualitative research debate. From a qualitative perspective, art experience should never be reduced, or categorised, in way that fragments the totality of experience. In the NICE (2002; 11) review of appropriate methods of research and evaluation, it is highlighted that quantifying and reducing art experience into a "star rating system" limits the attention paid to the humanistic variables that are the central focus of community arts programmes. This relates to the more general 'reductionist' argument in quantitative/qualitative debates that the generalisations produced by a quantitative approach would attempt to unrealistically fragment the complexity of psychosocial experience into measurable variables (e.g. Hollway, 2001). In this respect, Patton (2002) argues that a quantitative approach is inadequate to fully grasp the quality or effect of programmes for particular persons. It is suggested that it does not allow us to address the issues of 'what does the programme mean to participants?' 'What is the



quality of their experiences?’ An important finding from a review of participatory art activity in England was that community arts projects do not often undertake qualitative research because of a perceived incongruence with routine monitoring data. (Hacking et al, 2006).

A qualitative approach to exploring the meaning of art group experience can therefore be positioned as vital to understanding the links between community arts and mental health from a health psychology perspective. It is clear that research methodologies need to capture the depth, and not just the breadth, of community arts experiences – what Newman et al (2003; 320) term “useful – as opposed to accurate – evaluation reports.” In essence, this means taking a step back to understand not just the isolated benefits of community arts, but the context and circumstances in which they occur. This would lead to a better understanding of what community arts mean to participants, from the perspective of individual participation in community arts and in relation to community arts as a group experience.

#### **1.4 Research Aims**

The aim of this research project is to provide insight into the meaning of community arts for those experiencing mental health problems. This deliberately broad focus attempts to answer the following research question:

1. What does taking part in a community arts group mean to those affected by mental health problems?

A secondary research focus of the research then emerged from the preliminary analysis of interview data, where it was interpreted that participants were placing significant focus on elements of personal growth that had resulted from art group participation.

Furthermore, it was interpreted that aspects of the group culture were particularly meaningful in allowing growth to be experienced. Perceptions of art group characteristics, and their impact on personal growth, were therefore explored in a second round of interviews.

The following research question led the focus of second stage interviewing:

2. What can be learned about the process and ethos of community arts in relation to the meaning of participatory experience?

Whereas question 1 intended to focus on the meaning of *participation* in a community arts group for mental health, question 2 was about the actual *group* in terms of what a community arts group for mental health means to participants. In this sense, question 2 aimed to provide insight into what a community arts group for mental health 'looks like' from the perspectives of those who engage in it.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

This chapter covers four main areas of methodology: The methodological framework, the use of semi-structured interviewing, participation in the study and the approach to analysing the data. As is outlined in the following introductory paragraph, the methodological work throughout this section was informed by a preliminary exploration of the research context.

### **An emergent methodological design**

Yardley's (2008) guidelines for enhancing study validity advocate that a study should be placed in the context of its relevant theoretical and empirical background. In relation, Larkin et al (2006: 108) suggest that the approaches that are the most sensitive and responsive to the nature of a subject-matter will evidently yield the most profitable outcomes. 'Contextualisation' relates to the common approach of drawing on the extant literature, but importantly includes the researcher's sensitivity to the socio-cultural context of participants (Yardley, 2008). A first key step for the research was therefore an exploration of the art group context by talking to those involved in running the group. It was hoped that this would provide an introductory overview of the purpose, structure and approach of the art group given that community arts can represent such a diverse range of practices. It was also envisaged that it would enable the methodological approach to the research to be designed in terms of its fit with a contextualised picture of the research setting.

A meeting with the artist running the art group provided insight into the overall philosophy underpinning the art group set-up. Some introductory observation of the art group also allowed the opportunity to reflect on how the methodology of the study would have to be sensitive to the needs of art group members and the nature of mental health problems. The findings generated from this part of the study are not

housed within the main study findings because their purpose was to contextualise the approach to formal data collection that was later adopted and to provide a sensitive 'lead-in' to exploring member perceptions. They are therefore presented as a context exploration appendix (appendix 1).

## **2.1 The methodological framework**

The context exploration stage of the research (appendix 1) and insights gained from the literature (chapter 1) had both underscored the need for a methodological approach that allowed a focus on the meaning of experience and that allowed the possibility of individual and collective aspects of experience to be explored. As is commonly assumed, however, qualitative methodology is not a homogeneous field; there are a number of epistemological positions that can be adopted. The following sections therefore outline the rationale for the adoption of the methodological framework, and its relevance to exploring art group experience in a holistic way and with respect to individual and collective aspects of meaning.

### **2.1.1 Choosing a fitting epistemology**

Close scrutiny of various methodological approaches revealed that the epistemological assumptions, and resulting methodology, of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was particularly fitted to the exploration of art group experience. IPA is one of several phenomenological psychology perspectives, which has a central concern with the conscious experience of individuals (Eatough et al, 2008). Its title was given by Smith (1996) to signal the dual nature of the approach: The 'phenomenological' facet of IPA means that it is concerned with exploring a participant's personal perception or account of an experience, whilst the 'interpretative' part signifies that this can never be done directly or completely because the researcher's access to the participant's personal world is complicated by the researcher's own conceptions.

Madill et al (2000) demonstrate that different epistemological positions are evident even within a single named methodology, which means that it is insufficient to label a study as 'IPA' without being transparent about its epistemological foundations. This relates to concerns over "method slurring" or blurring of distinctions between qualitative approaches that fail to relate their methods to a coherent epistemological foundation (Thorne et al, 2004: 5). In accordance, this study followed Yardley's (2008: 259) advice to provide a "solid grounding of the methods used and their theoretical background," and to provide a fit between the research question and methodology. The following section therefore brings together the epistemological assumptions of IPA with community arts from the outset, rather than describing IPA as an isolated methodology (further details of the quality guidelines adopted for the study can be found in appendix 2).

### **2.1.2 Using IPA to exploring 'experience'**

With direct relevance to exploring the art group in terms of actual participation, IPA's focus on a Heideggarian phenomenology places experience as a central concern. Its interest is therefore on how we focus our attention on things in a conscious way (intentionality), and what occurs between a person and the world around them (intersubjectivity) (Langdridge, 2007). Although Smith has linked the phenomenological underpinnings of IPA with an interest in cognition, it evidently departs from mainstream (cognitive) psychology's attempts to understand cognition as an inner mental state. Instead, the focus is outwards on conscious lived experience, and therefore closer to Bruner's (1990) conceptualisation of cognitive psychology as the science of meaning and meaning-making. In accordance, IPA positions research participants as the "experiential experts" of the phenomenon under investigation (Eatough et al, 2008; 1772).

As previously identified, exploration on experience necessitates a focus on holistic accounts that take the meaning of experience into account. IPA was found to be fitting in relation to each of these concepts:

### ***Exploring art group experience holistically***

In accordance with the aim of maintaining a holistic view of art group experience, the two facets of the 'interpretative' stance of IPA are said to do greater justice to the "totality of the person" (Smith, 2008; 54). This dual emphasis aims to a) understand an experience from the perspective of participants; termed an "insider's perspective" and b) to make sense of what the participant is saying by asking critical questions about their accounts. Smith (2008) relates these two facets of interpretation to empathic and questioning hermeneutics, respectively, but theorises that they can be more simply conceptualised in terms of 'understanding;' in the sense of identifying or empathising, and in making sense of.

This interpretative range is said to allow studies to be mapped onto various disciplinary and sub-disciplinary areas. Smith (2004), for example, points out that his study on the transition to motherhood (Smith, 1999b) could be fitted into, and across, areas of health psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, applied psychology, political psychology, cognitive psychology, and clinical psychology. When it is considered that arts for health are seen as related to both individual and social approaches to health, it is fitting that IPA allows for findings to holistically represent the possibility of community arts as a multidimensional phenomenon. It is the ability of IPA to explore biopsychosocial perspectives from a wide-ranging lens that is said to make it particularly popular within health psychology (Reid et al, 2005).

### ***Exploring the meaning of art group experience***

Inherent throughout IPA's hermeneutic phenomenological stance, and with particular relevance to the aim of this study, is a central focus on the meanings that experiences hold for participants. In accordance, an IPA analysis is designed to capture the quality of participants' experiences by attempting to interpret the meanings contained within texts and interview transcripts (Smith, 2008). Importantly, however, Smith and Eatough (2006) remind us that interpretation of meaning has more than one layer by their reference to a "double hermeneutic;" that is, where participants are trying to make sense of their world and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. Rather than seeing the researcher's interpretative position as a source of bias, IPA sees the researcher's conceptions as both necessary and inseparable from the research process (Shaw, 2001). This is based on the assumed existence of intersubjectivity, which theorises that every person, as well as being an individual, also has a "receptivity" for all other people and therefore a "collectivity that allows the possibility of mutual understanding" (Smith, 2007: 5).

#### **2.1.3 Using IPA to explore individual and shared dimensions of experience**

IPA was considered to be particularly fitting to the research aims and context in the sense that it considers both individual and collective meanings of taking part in the art group. Each of these facets is now discussed in turn:

##### ***IPA and Individual experience***

A quantitative approach was deemed incongruent to exploring individual experience in the sense that it would include qualitatively different individuals, but produce generalised findings that "make it impossible to know if the hypothesised relationship applies to this or that person in particular" (Radley & Chamberlain, 2001; 325). However, similar arguments are made about some forms of qualitative analysis. Grounded theory, for example, is said to be focused on finding repeated patterns of

meaning and approaches based on qualitative content analysis are subject to the 'reductionist' criticism of a quantitative approach since only discrete categories of data are produced. In their comparison of content analysis with other qualitative approaches to analysing the same set of data, Wilkinson (2000) found that content analysis did not allow reflection of complexities within single accounts of experience; for example, contradictory statements and explanations.

In line with the focus on individuality in community arts, the phenomenological focus of IPA is idiographic, and thus concerned with individual personal perception as opposed to producing an objective statement about an object or event (Smith, 2008). In this sense, IPA is based on the epistemological assumption that a gap exists between an object and an individual's perception of that object and it is this subjectivity that is of primary interest to the research (Smith, 1996a). The potentially different interpretations of a phenomena or experience are regarded as equally valid and valued within this approach (Lemon & Taylor, 1997). Indeed, allowing only group-level claims to be represented was found to be criticised for their inability to say anything "substantive and specific about the particular individuals who, in fact, provided the data for the study in the first place" (Smith 2004: 42). In accordance, the whole process of the research is determined by the accounts given by participants, and analysis is concerned with individual case studies of subjective report (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

The interpretative part of IPA not only relates to the researcher's interpretation, but assumes that participants seek to interpret their experiences into some form that is understandable to them; the premise that forms first part of the "double hermeneutics" concept. In accordance, Langdridge (2007: 5) states that experience is therefore recognised as something that will "be differently meaningful for different people." This perspective resonates strongly with Patton's (2002) suggestion that the meanings attributed to shared processes in community programmes may be



qualitatively different for different people. Most importantly, however, it fits with the context of the art group in respect of the previously discussed focus on individuality.

Exploring individual experience from an IPA perspective is also about the recognition of context; a premise that is particularly fitting to this research project's focus on a group experience. Brocki & Wearden (2006) and Reid et al's (2005) reviews show that IPA research in health psychology has been largely focused on investigating a phenomenon that is shared by a group of individuals, but that is experienced within different time-spans and personal lives. The consideration of group contexts on individual meaning-making has therefore been sparse in comparison with the considered influences of individual lifeworlds. Data on personal and social aspects of life contexts can be identified in self-report data (Wilkinson, 2000) in order to help us understand what surrounds and impacts on meaning-making; however, the exploration of a phenomenon that is also a group experience brings an added layer of 'context' into the equation. This layer of context is not explicitly discussed in IPA literature.

The lack of recognition given to the role of group context is perhaps surprising given that IPA acknowledges socially constructed elements of meaning-making. Smith (2008), for example, links IPA with symbolic interactionism, which considers that meanings are constructed within a social, as well as personal, world. In addition, Smith & Eatough (2006) argue that whilst experience is given a central focus in IPA, the multiple influences on any experience must be recognised, including its historical and cultural context, and social norms and practices (Smith & Eatough, 2006). This premise includes acknowledgement of the role of language in shaping participant's responses, with Smith (1996; 264) postulating that IPA can "engage in a fruitful dialogue with discourse analysis." Interestingly, however, Larkin et al (2006) suggest that the role of context has been overlooked in IPA studies; according to the authors, IPA's idiographic approach is often misrepresented in a way that suggests that a person's inner

(subjective) domain can be separated from context (Larkin et al 2006; 105). The authors refer this back to Husserl's argument against "the dualistic separation of egos from worlds," and to Heidegger's suggestion that by studying individuals, we are always dealing with "persons-in-context" and their relatedness and engagement to the phenomenon being studied. The concept of "persons-in-context" is related to a contextualist approach, which epistemologically sees findings as context specific and ontologically posits that knowledge is "local, provisional, and situation dependent" (Madill et al, 2000; 9). The authors further suggest that it is IPA's focus on individuals within context that allows interpretative range and flexibility; however, many IPA studies present 'subjective meanings' without consideration of socio-cultural contexts in which individual meanings are embedded.

#### ***IPA and collective experience: Embedding nuances in a collective framework***

The "epistemological diversity" that evidently characterises IPA, due to its dual emphasis on phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith & Eatough: 325) means that the approach to data analysis does not require a narrow 'either/or' view to idiographic and generic aspects of qualitative data. Instead, it is argued that "a good IPA study will at all times allow itself to be parsed in two ways – it should be possible to learn something about both the important generic themes in the analysis and the narrative lifeworld of the particular participants who have told their stories." (Smith & Eatough, 2006: 325). In the reporting of the data, nuances from participants' accounts are retained whilst, at the time same time, embedded in a framework that represents the phenomenon being investigated (Eatough et al, 2008). IPA papers that have been deemed as good quality are those that have paid attention to representing both individual and group experience (Hefferon & Rodriguez, 2011; Smith, 2011 – see appendix 2). From an IPA perspective, the formulation of an account that looks at generic aspects of experience is still considered idiographic in the sense that it is constructed by "working cautiously up from individual case studies towards more general claims, rather than nomothetic-

making claims about individual cases from large-scale aggregate data” (Smith, 1999b; 412).

In addition to paying attention to quality, the possibility of embedding subjective experience within a collective framework was seen as imperative to understanding both the phenomenon of participating in community arts (research question 1) and the process and ethos of community arts as a group (research question 2). As discussed in chapter 1, it was considered that participation in community arts as a group experience would inherently encompass meanings in a way that individually-experienced phenomenon’s (e.g. individual art making in the home) would not. Furthermore, the study of group experiences that span a range of groups or settings may not provide insight into the particular aspects of a group’s ethos that are important in the understanding of meaning-making. This is relevant to the concept of generalisability from an IPA perspective, where IPA focuses inward on a homogenous group, and can later compare these findings with research on similar groups. This differs from approaches, like grounded theory, where the sampling strategy is used instead to broaden the applicability of findings (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

#### **2.1.4 Complexity, process and novelty**

A dual focus on individual and group experience can be seen to relate to the suggestion that IPA is “especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2008; 55). As conveyed by his paper’s title, “Playing in the Mud,” Camic (2008) argues that the methodological and epistemological issues in researching arts for health are as “messy” as art itself. This can be reflective of the assumption that the activity spans individual and group experiences as well as subjective and collective meanings. It can also be related to the aforementioned point that community arts ensue flexible approaches with no set outcome against which to measure experience.

IPA is also said to provide insight into the process by which experiences are made sense of and is particularly suitable to “illuminating processes operating within models as opposed to the traditional focus on outcome measures.” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006: 101). In relation to the study’s second research question on the process of community arts, it was therefore felt that IPA was of particular suitability. Furthermore, the concept of ‘process’ was regarded as prevalent in various facets of mental health experience that were explored in chapter 1; in particular, process was related to the concept of recovery from mental health problems, to community arts benefit as a developmental process and fundamentally to the act of art-making. It therefore seemed generally fitting that the methodology adopted allowed for the exploration of process within the data. Such a focus is seen to provide some explanatory power, and it is this kind of conceptual creativity that is thought to demonstrate a researcher’s “pragmatic obligation” to assume that their findings are accessible to a practice application (Thorne et al, 2004; 16).

Finally, the suitability of IPA to the exploration of ‘novelty’ is congruent with the aforementioned ‘newness’ of community arts in terms of the need to develop better understanding about ‘what they are’ and how they can contribute to mental health problems. IPA has already been used as an approach to explore the experience of having mental health problems (Birch et al, 2005; Isherwood et al, 2007; Rhodes & Jakes, 2000) including issues of diagnosis (Horn et al, 2007), stigma (Knight et al, 2003) and services and therapies (Hodgetts et al, 2007; Knight & Moloney, 2005); however, the aforementioned study by Van Lith (2011) is, to the author’s knowledge, the first IPA study looking at community arts for mental health. As previously discussed, however, Van Lith’s study recruits participants across a range of mental health settings, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the links between group ethos and participatory experience. As far as the author is aware, this research study is the first IPA exploration of a single community art group for those with mental health problems.

## **2.2 Interviews**

### **2.2.1 Use of interviews: Rationale**

Approaches to data collection were considered collaboratively with the artist at the context exploration stage of the research. It was clear that some methods of data collection would be incongruent with the nature of mental health problems and with the learning difficulties that the artist had said were also present in the group (see appendix 3). This is particularly true of the types of approaches that can be laborious for participants; for example, diary-keeping, written accounts and internet contact. Instead, one-to-one interviews were discussed as being potentially suitable. Challenges to an interview approach, however, were also considered. In particular, the artist advised that members may be nervous about taking part in interviews and may struggle to keep their attention on the topic. Such challenges are reflected in some of the mental health literature (e.g. Booth & Booth 1996, Isherwood et al 2007); however, previous research with mental health groups still demonstrates the usefulness of interviews as an approach: Isherwood et al (2007) found that interviews with people with learning disabilities and mental health problems, although challenging, gave an interesting insight into explanations of offending. Similarly, Newton et al (2007) used semi-structured interviews to provide an insightful account of a group intervention for auditory hallucinations.

Coupled with the suitability of interviews to participants, interviews were also considered to be most fitting to the research question and to IPA. Although novel ways of collecting data in IPA research are being tried and tested (Smith, 2004), it is still broadly agreed that the semi-structured interview is the most optimal method. The approach is largely advocated as a collaborative process that regards the participants as the “primary experts” in conveying their experience; hence fitting with the epistemological foundations of phenomenology (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Although

firmer links between IPA and cognitive psychology (e.g. Smith & Eatough, 2006) are contested by various authors (e.g. Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2001), there is a common epistemological assumption that what someone verbalises is “at least in part a reflection” of what a person thinks about a topic, thereby making interviews an effective method of exploring perception (Smith, 2007; 5).

IPA assumes a relativist perspective and therefore focuses on “reality as it appears and is made meaningful for the individual.” (Smith & Eatough, 2006: 323). This perspective seemed particularly fitting to a mental health context where, as the artist had advised in the context exploration stage, delusions can be confused with reality. The IPA literature in mental health, although sparse, demonstrates how ‘reality’ as it appears to the individual can be embraced in IPA mental health research: Rhodes and Jakes’ (2000) IPA study actively sought to include those experiencing delusions in attempt to assign meaning to their accounts. Similarly, Knudson and Coyle (2002) explore meaning-making in the explanations that people construct through their experience of hearing voices and the influence of meanings on coping strategies.

One other method that was considered was a focus group approach; however, Smith (2004) and Newton et al (2007) suggest that they can compromise the focus on detailed exploration of personal experience. In accordance, it was considered that a focus group may result in the ‘generic’ or social aspects of meaning-making overriding more personal accounts, which may be further complicated by meanings being created by the process of the focus group itself. In this sense, it was considered that there may be complex difficulties ‘using a group to research a group’ and it was considered that the comparison of individual interviews for exploring shared meaning would be more in line with an idiographic focus. Semi-structured interviews were also thought to be open and flexible enough to allow both individual and shared levels of meaning to emerge,

but without the social environment of a focus group complicating participant's reflections of art group experience.

### **2.2.2 Interview structure**

#### ***Two-stage interview***

Data collection through semi-structured interviewing followed a two-stage approach since the first set of data was obtained as part of an art group evaluation. The first interview, as part of the evaluation, had a wider ranging agenda that also included more practical elements of the art group set-up. Discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using multiple interviews with the same participant in an IPA approach is sparse, but was recently outlined by Flowers (2008) following a discussion at the Scottish IPA interest group. It was identified that rationales for conducting second interviews are often based on pragmatic decisions, which relate to both interviewer and participant factors. A researcher's "awareness of opportunities lost" (p25), in terms of potential probing, can often shape decisions to conduct subsequent interviews. As Flowers discusses, the advantage of first interview analysis structuring subsequent interviews is that it can maximise depth and opportunity for probing.

In addition to advantages to the depth of data collection, the use of a two stage interview approach was found to relate to participants' 'attentional' capacity, as defined by Flowers (2008). As foreseen by the artist in the context exploration stage of the research, attentional capacity of art group members was indeed problematic. Splitting the data collection into two stages was less laborious for participants in terms of allowing time for 'wandering off topic' and interview breaks. Indeed, Booth & Booth (1996) suggest that interviews with people who have problems articulating should be spread over several sessions. Further reflections on this point, and others in relation to participants' responses to interviews, can be located in appendix 3.

### ***Semi-structured approach***

As recommended by Smith (2004), a semi-structured approach to interviewing was employed, rather than a purely open-ended investigation that might open with a question such as, “tell me about your experience of the art group.” This approach was informed by information gathered from the artist about communication often being problematic, and also by the work of Booth & Booth (1996) who found that open-ended questions in interviews received the poorest response from groups with learning difficulties. Newton (2007) reflects on such difficulties in interviews with people with auditory hallucinations, e.g. identifying the need for more prompting and asking questions more than once. Within IPA literature, Smith (2004) points out that the “noninterventionalist” approach of IPA interviewing will probably need to become more interventionist with some groups, and people with learning disabilities are included in this discussion. This learning point is now being reflected in more current literature, with Knight et al (2003) using a greater number of questions than typically used in IPA in order to investigate stigma in schizophrenia. Such flexibility in approaches to data collection can be seen to fit with Smith’s (2004) call for a ‘pushing of the boundaries’ in relation to the populations studied and choice of data collection methods. This allows for IPA to study groups that may otherwise be seen as incongruent with the approach.

Even without the challenges of research in mental health settings, Smith (2008) argues that a semi-structured approach allows the researcher to think in advance about the different ways in which the interview may proceed, which, in turn, enables the researcher to concentrate more thoroughly and confidentially on what the participant is saying. Furthermore, initial questions can be modified in light of the participant’s responses and interesting areas probed as they arise. However, following the guidelines of Smith (2008), this focus on eliciting the best responses from participants had to be balanced against the potential pitfall of participants’ accounts being too led



by the interview questions. In line with IPA's recommendations of a semi-structured approach to interviewing, open-ended questions were used as a flexible guide, allowing a balance to be made between using structured enough questions that responded to the communication needs of the group and allowing the research to be open-ended enough for a participant-led investigation of experience.

Participants were asked whether they were comfortable with the interviews being tape recorded; one participant (Janet) indicated that s/he was uncomfortable with the presence of the tape recorder and notes were therefore taken instead. Notes and transcribed interview data were stored confidentially and names were replaced by code numbers, thereby ensuring anonymity in the research. For reporting purposes, all participants were given pseudonyms, including the artist when participants refer to her in their interviews.

### **2.2.3 Interview Content**

#### ***First interviews***

First interviews concentrated on four main areas of participation in the art group. As recommended by Smith (1995; 2008), the most logical order of the schedule was considered. A chronological focus was adopted, which ranged from questions about initial participation, current views of the art group, to perceptions of the future. The interview schedule can be seen in appendix 4.

Questions were designed to elicit the participant's 'story' of taking part in the art group. This affected the questioning that was used in two ways: Firstly, according to Hollway (2001), it was considered that the interview should steer participants away from giving explanations, rather than stories; thus, the use of 'why' questions were not used. Secondly, the IPA literature explains how the individual meanings we attribute to

phenomena are part of experience itself. In this sense, phenomenology does not see meaning as something that is added onto perception; rather it is part of the perception of the individual (Willig, 2001). In relation to the “double hermeneutic” principle described earlier, meaning is also created through the researcher’s interpretative work. Consequently, participants were not asked what the art group “means” to them since this would appear to artificially suggest that meaning is somehow extractable from experience. It was also thought that such a question may be too vague in relation to the aforementioned challenges associated with open-ended interview questions in mental health contexts. This strategy can be seen to fit with IPA’s focus on remaining participant-led and true to the context of the data collection.

In addition, and in relation to the artist’s emphasis on user-led communication (see appendix 1), it was considered that insights into personal circumstances were not imperative to the research, with the aims being about the experience of the art group rather than experience of mental health problems. Hypothetically, the benefit of asking about mental health status was identified as being about the ability to gain insight into understanding the types of mental health problems that may benefit from participation in art; however, it was decided that the potential of a negative impact on the members would over-ride the inclusion of this question in the research. Nevertheless, it was expected that questions about the art group, and the types of benefits that members may have experienced, might generate some participant-led discussion about the nature of mental health problems.

Focusing interview questions on the art group and not on mental health also took into account that whilst IPA research has already focused on the phenomenon of mental health, it has not focused on the experience of taking part in community arts for mental health. As previously discussed, this represents a shift in focus from ‘illness orientated’ research to a positive psychology slant. Even within research that is focused

on mental health problems, it seems common to avoid the use of diagnostic labels in interviews. For example, Knight et al (2003) do not use terms in relation to mental health problems (e.g. schizophrenia or psychoses) unless mentioned by the participant. Similarly, in their exploration of stigma in people with intellectual disabilities, Jahoda & Markova (2004) refrain from use of 'handicap' or 'disability' in their interviews.

### ***Second interviews***

The second interviews also followed a semi-structured approach and explored the participant's hints at an art group culture, which the first interviews had not adequately probed. When talking about the positive changes and personal growth that participants had experienced at the art group, it became apparent that there was an underlying sense of an art group culture that allowed positive experiences to happen. Since positive experience seemed dependent on this culture, it was decided that it was imperative to explore its meaning in more depth.

This strategy is consistent with Flowers (2008: 25) suggestion that reasons for second interviews can often relate to the researcher's "awareness of opportunities lost." Rather than asking directly about this culture, which was considered to be too leading, the approach taken was to ask about growth themes from a preliminary analysis of first interview data. For each growth theme in the second interviews, it was firstly checked that the theme (e.g. increased confidence) applied to the individual participant; an approach suggested by Jonathan Smith after writing to him for advice. This was seen to remain true to a participant-led approach and can be seen as a form of member checking - an advantage of second interviews that is identified by Flowers (2008). A subsequent question, "what enabled you to feel like that?" was then asked for each theme. It was thought that this question might take participants a step back to explore the underlying processes of the art group.

The strategy of using data from the first interviews to explore in second interviews is consistent with the recommendation of Fade (2004) to have a list of themes to hand when carrying out subsequent interviews. As also recommended by Fade, however, it was important to maintain an inductive and idiographic approach in the second interviews by avoiding the leading of participants into pre-determined areas of interest. This was thought to be maintained by asking participants questions that were based around the themes found in the first interviews, rather than areas of personal or theoretical interest. By the time second interviews were analysed, however, growth themes changed and developed, including the emergence of new facets of experience. None of the themes explored in the second interview questions, however, became unrelated to the final findings. Rather, their use as a tool to explore the art group culture and to further advance understanding about the first identified theme of personal growth was largely successful.

## **2.3 Participants**

### **2.3.1 Sampling**

Purposive sampling takes place in IPA so that a “closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant” is chosen. This means that the group is usually fairly homogeneous, rather than random or representative, and is contingent upon on the phenomenon under investigation (Smith, 2008; 56). Links have therefore been made between IPA and ethnographic researchers who carry out investigations in one particular context and aim to provide description about that particular culture, rather than attempting to say something about any other culture (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Such a strategy is evidently based upon IPA’s contextualist epistemological foundation, which sees findings as context specific, and on its ontological position that knowledge is “local, provisional, and situation dependent” (Madill, 2000; 9). This differs from approaches, like Grounded Theory, that use theoretical sampling and data saturation in

an attempt to broaden the applicability of the findings to a more general level theory (Brocki & Wearden, 2006.)

### **2.3.2 Participation**

In the first set of interviews, four males and four females took part; however one male was unable to articulate any responses to questions and another could only provide very limited answers. This second male also became very anxious at being unable to articulate fuller answers and so the interview was terminated after only a few minutes. Six sets of data were therefore obtained. Although Booth & Booth (1996) provide useful guidelines for interviewing inarticulate subjects, the issue of using IPA with extremely limited verbal data is contentious.

In the second interviews, four of the original six participants agreed to take part; two males and two females. Reasons for non-participation of the other two included hospitalisation and feeling unwell on the day. Unfortunately, their non-attendance was not known until the day. These issues can be seen as typically reflective of the challenges associated with research, and within mental health groups in particular. It also perhaps illustrates Smith & Eatough's (2006: 328) statement that "inevitably, the research sample selects itself" within the boundaries of the subject matter. Although it was considered that these two participants could have been contacted at a later date, the time constraints and geographical distance involved meant that the end-point of data collection had to be drawn.

Although IPA challenges the traditional linear relationship between 'number of participants' and 'value of research' (Reid et al, 2005), Smith (1999a) argues that the approach works particularly well with sample sizes of up to ten in order to uncover depth of meaning. More recently, it has been advised that six to eight is an appropriate number for postgraduate study (Smith & Eatough, 2006). In Reid et al's review of

studies that use IPA, larger samples were a function of the use of focus groups or comparison groups. Smaller samples sizes that provide adequate 'contextualisation' are increasingly being advocated in the wider IPA literature (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). There has been a recent IPA drive on the principle of "less is more" in relation to both participants and number of themes, with concerns that analyses of larger numbers of participants can be too broad and descriptive. In essence, this is seen to go against IPA's commitment to idiography (Hefferon & Rodriguez, 2011; 756). Smith (2004, 2006) has even called for more use of absorbing and complex single-person case studies within postgraduate communities.

Although unintentional and confined by the purposive sampling of one specific art group, it can be argued that the use of six participants in the first interviews fits particularly well with Smith & Eatough's (2006) six-eight recommendation. Four participants in the second interviews can also be seen as fitting with the call for smaller numbers; providing the opportunity for researchers to explore greater depth of interpretation. The disadvantage, however, is that the personal stories, or 'lifeworlds,' of two participants in the second stage of data analysis were essentially lost.

All but one participant had been attending the art group for the duration that the current artist has been running it (approximately five years). Half of those participants had begun attending when the current artist started and the other half had been members for a lengthy period of time; estimates ranged between eight and ten years. It was therefore assumed that participants would be able to reflect on their experiences over a substantial period of time.

Further reflections on the process of participation, in terms of the gradual process of inviting members to take part in the research and participant's responses to interviews are provided in appendix 3.

### **2.3.3 Ethics**

The project was approved by Queen Margaret University ethics committee and given approval by the management of the charity. Appendix 3 details the ethical considerations that were made throughout the process of the research.

## **2.4 Data analysis**

### **2.4.1 The analytical approach**

Smith (2008; 67) argues that IPA is “not a prescriptive methodology,” but offers guidelines for analysis that can be adapted to a researcher’s own personal style of working. Larkin et al (2006: 104) therefore suggest that, rather than a distinct method, it is more appropriate to understand IPA in epistemological terms as a “stance or perspective” from which to approach data analysis. In other words, IPA guidelines for analysis do not differ significantly from other forms of thematic analysis in their pragmatic approach to identifying themes in the data; instead, it is suggested that it is the dual emphasis on phenomenology and interpretation that makes the methodology distinct. Indeed, the use of IPA as a flexible method is reflected in the different approaches taken by the IPA studies in Brocki & Wearden’s (2006) review.

Such flexibility of approach can be seen to fit with calls against “methodolatry” (Reicher, 2000 - see appendix 2) and may go some way to addressing concerns that researchers are inhibiting their studies by trying to fit them into constrained disciplinary boundaries (Thorne et al, 2004). Concurrently, however, there is also an increasing push for the further development of analytical guidance as a critical element in the validity of qualitative approaches (Thorne et al, 2004). According to Larkin et al (2006), the flexibility of IPA studies can therefore be mistaken with a lack of rigour, and the authors postulate that the balance that is required to do an IPA study well means

that the approach can be more difficult in comparison with qualitative frameworks that offer more prescription in terms of epistemological certainty and methodological guidance. This balancing act can be seen as related to two central concepts:

### ***Levels of interpretation***

Larkin et al (2006) suggest that overuse of the term 'insider's perspective' has led some to regard IPA as purely descriptive of participants accounts without moving to an interpretative or conceptual level of analysis. More recently, Hefferon & Rodriguez (2011) similarly argue that the increasing popularity of IPA amongst students in the fields of health, clinical and counselling is due to the appeal of the focus on subjective lived experience, but with the concern that IPA becomes a default choice for students who mistake it simply for a form of thematic analysis with little focus on interpretation. With particular relevance to mental health research, Larkin et al (2006) also suggest that the need to 'hear' the perspectives of marginalised groups leads some to regard a purely reflective account as sufficient. Thorne et al (2004; 7) relate this premise to the difference between "free-floating theorising" and "critical examination" within methodological guidelines. A more accurate view of IPA, is said to be one that is more consistent with the latter; that goes beyond the mere description of the participant's phenomenological account to consider the meaning of it "in this particular situation" (Larkin et al, 2006; 104). The need for IPA to be interpretative, contextualised and to go beyond description, was therefore a central aim of the analysis.

### ***The active role of the researcher***

In result of the interpretative (hermeneutic) foundation of IPA, it is also argued that an account of themes "emerging" or being "discovered" is a passive description of the analytical process, which denies the active role of the researcher. Braun & Clark quote Ely et al (1997; 205) who say that the language of themes emerging can be misinterpreted to mean that "themes reside in the data, and if we just look hard



enough they will emerge like Venus on the half shell.” Instead, it is argued that “If themes ‘reside’ anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.” In this sense, researchers are regarded as a “person-in-context” in the same way that participants are (Larkin et al, 2006; 106) and analysis is referred to as a balance of “emic” (phenomenological insider) and “etic” (interpretative outsider) positions (Reid et al; 22). In accordance, Smith (2008; 66) argues that “meanings are not transparently available – they must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation.”

The role of the researcher in creating an account of participant experience that is interpretable links to the concept of ‘reflexivity,’ which is the explicit consideration of the ways in which different stages of the study may have been influenced by the researcher. Maintaining a reflexive approach to a study enhances its transparency; a feature determined important to the validity of qualitative approaches (Yardley, 2008). The reflective appendices of this study (appendix 1 & 3) aim to maintain a reflexive approach to the study.

#### **2.4.2 The analytical procedure**

Firstly, the transcription of the tape recorded interviews was treated as a close familiarisation of interview content, with notes taken and attention paid to possible meanings and potential interpretations. Bird (2005) therefore suggests that transcription can be seen as part of interpretation, with meaning being created through the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Next came the in-depth analysis of the transcribed text: Although not prescriptive, an analytical framework is offered in IPA and is described and exemplified in various texts. Two workable methods are offered: the first is to generate a list of master themes from the first case, and then to supplement this master list with further themes as the

analysis is continued with other cases. The second option is to generate a new master list of themes for each individual case. For this study, Smith's second approach was adopted in that the insights produced as a result of detailed engagement with the data from individual cases are integrated only in the latter stages of the research (Willig, 2001). The data was therefore analysed within cases before moving to a cross-case analysis, and this was seen to give equal value to the possibility of both individual and collective perceptions of art group experience. It was also thought to remain true to an idiographic focus by beginning with individual focus and only slowly working up to more general themes (Smith, 2008).

In accordance with Smith (2008) a free textual analysis for each individual transcript was carried out where the transcript was read a number of times and interesting or significant points were noted in the left hand margin. This involved summarising and noting where there were connections, similarities and contradictions in what the participant was saying. Although this was a line-by-line approach, the analysis also followed the advice of Thorne et al (2004; 14) to not lose perspective of the larger context of the interview. The authors argue that "staying in the microscopic view of the trees has a tendency to blur one's perspective of the forest, and so it becomes important to remember to move in and out of the detail in an iterative manner, asking repeatedly, what is happening here?" This resonates with Smith's (2007; 5) discussion of the "hermeneutic circle" where a dynamic relationship is assumed to exist between the part and the whole on a number of levels: "To understand the part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the part."

The preliminary notes recorded in the left hand margin then helped to form an initial effort at interpreting themes, which progressed the analysis to a higher level of interpretation. As Smith et al (1999a; 221) describe, the interpretation of themes was about capturing the "essential quality" of what the participant was saying in the text,

linking their interpreted meanings with psychological terminology. Themes were noted down the right hand margin for each transcript, treating the whole transcript as data and not making premature judgements about which areas or topics were of particular interest. For each transcript, the themes were firstly listed chronologically and then connections and divergences between themes were sought. As recommended by Smith & Eatough (2006), the use of copy and paste helped to organise connecting themes into clusters for each participant. These clusters were then each given a higher conceptual title, representing what was now a list of master themes for each transcript.

As is suggested by Smith (2004; 45) a 'grounded' approach to IPA means that the themes generated are close to the original data, rather than intertwined with insights from extant theory. Smith argues that, in a more psychoanalytic approach, the extant theory is instead "imported" and "read into" the passage. Following Smith's guidance, the theme names drew on psychological terminology, but remained grounded in what the participant was saying. At this point, however, it is important to acknowledge that although IPA is described as inductive or 'grounded,' it is argued that the analytical process cannot ever achieve a first-person account. Instead, the account is constructed by participant and researcher and the objective is to produce a coherent 'third-person' account whilst attempting to stay as close to the participant's account as possible (Larkin et al, 2006). Although Smith (2004; 43) argues that the inductive stance in IPA is central to the approach, he also acknowledges that "of course, in practice the research process involves an interplay between induction and deduction."

The next stages of analysis involved a complex and time-consuming process of looking across transcripts at the master themes and identifying which of these seemed to connect across individuals to produce higher level superordinate themes. Within this process, the master themes in some transcripts guided the analysis back to other individual transcripts to explore whether the theme may also be apparent in other

interviews. Sometimes, the theme was apparent but had originally been classed as a sub-theme within individual transcripts; as Smith (1999a) points out, this stage of the analysis involved some re-ordering of themes so that some themes changed to become either more subordinate or superordinate. Initial master themes also became re-conceptualised when further connections were identified between master themes and sub-themes within and across individual transcripts, particularly when going back to the original data to confirm and explore the themes more fully. At this stage, some sub-themes were re-located to a different master theme when connections between themes were more fully explored. Similarly, some master themes were split when divergences seemed apparent, or amalgamated when two master themes were representing the same concept. Within Smith's (2007; 5) discussion of the hermeneutic circle, he talks about this process being non-linear and with "the possibility of constantly digging deeper with one's analysis" as the researcher goes back and forward between the part (e.g. a text extract) to the whole (e.g. the whole interview transcript).

Due to the focus on individual idiosyncrasies, as well as areas of convergence, a sub-theme only apparent in one interview transcript (and not seen as a recurring theme across transcripts) was often still included as part of a larger major theme. For example, in the major theme of 'abilities and skills,' only one participant talks about regaining skills that she had before developing mental health problems. 'Regaining abilities and skills' was therefore included as a sub-theme of this major theme because it added dimension to the theme and remained true an idiographic focus of IPA. In other forms of analysis, this theme would have been dropped due to it only belonging to one participant.

The final stages of analysis were concentrated on the overarching superordinate themes that were interpreted across the master themes. This stage was also complex since major themes were often related to either art group culture or the processes and

benefits involved in art, but with some themes overlapping facets of culture, process and benefit. An original interpretation was that this split could be thematically represented through three superordinate themes of culture, process and benefit, with corresponding major themes housed under each; however, as more analytical focus was placed on the themes (often involving re-reading of transcripts and data extracts) it was finally decided that two superordinate themes that captured the prevailing essence and meaning of art group experience were a better way of representing the totality of what participants said. Within each of these two broad thematic categories, major themes could sometimes be split into 'culture' and 'process.' For example, in the first superordinate theme – freedom from expectation – participants talked about the aspects of the group that made them feel 'free' (interpreted as group culture) but also about the process of feeling free from expectation when engaging in art. The second superordinate theme – personal growth - represents more of an outcome-type focus, in terms of benefits, but also includes aspects of process and culture in terms of the parts of art group experience that allowed personal growth to happen, including the inherent difficulties that form part of this experience.

It was felt that allowing culture, process and benefit to exist together within superordinate themes, as opposed to separating them out at a higher superordinate level, more realistically represented art group experience as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. This can be seen as the focus on the "whole" in the hermeneutic circle. Interestingly, there have been concerns that students are often presenting too many distinct superordinate themes, suggesting that the discrete links between themes may not always be identified (Hefferon & Rodriguez, 2011). The interpretation of two superordinate themes linking facets of culture, process and benefit was therefore seen to avoid segregation of data in a way that failed to represent links and, essentially, the totality of participants' experiences. Where appropriate, however, it was useful to attempt to separate out culture from process as different sub-themes within the

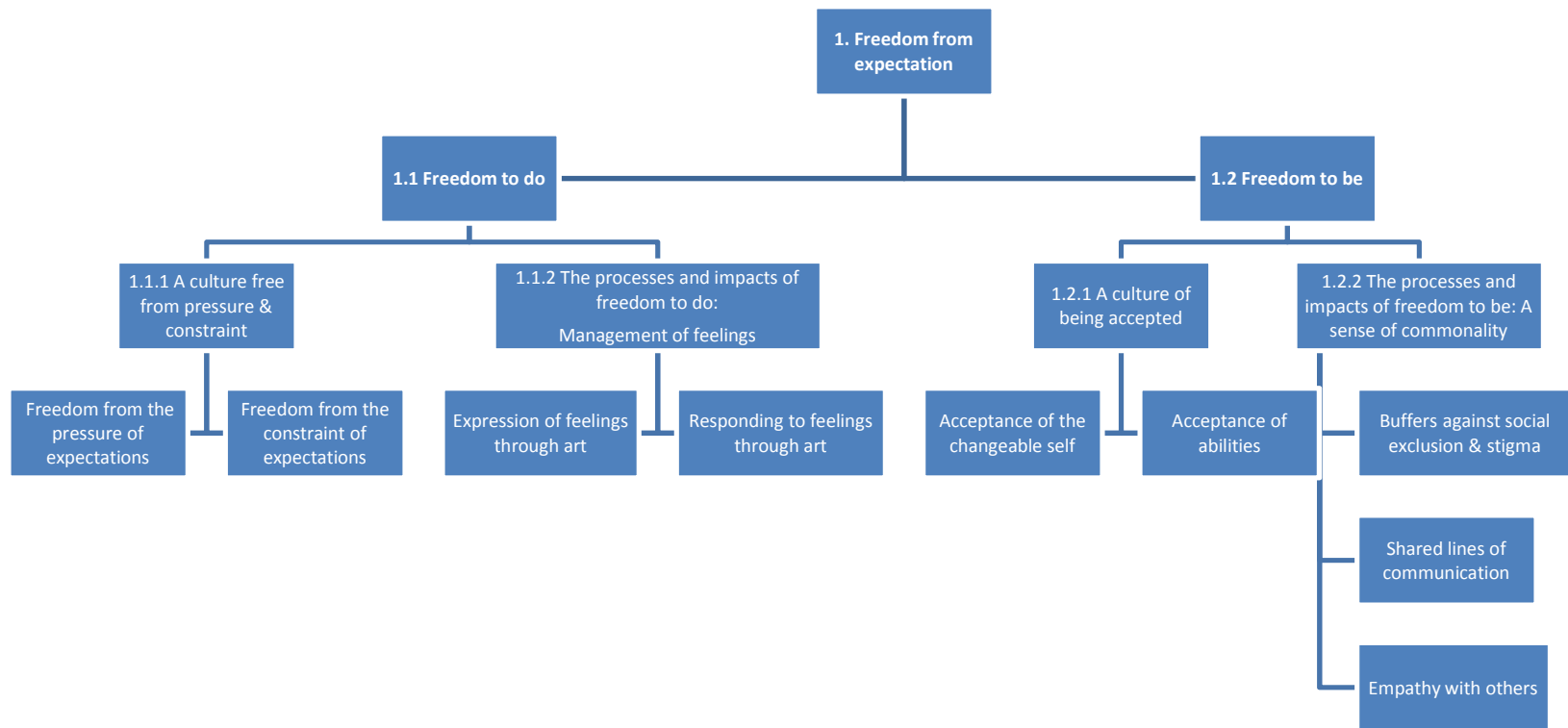
superordinate themes. So whilst still linked, the data could be presented in a way that identified the different facets of experience from more distinct angles of culture and process. This perhaps resonates with the focus on the “part” in Smith’s (2007) hermeneutic circle in the sense that there needed to be a focus on culture and process as distinct entities in order to understand them when combined.

### **Chapter 3: Findings**

Two super-ordinate themes were interpreted from the data:

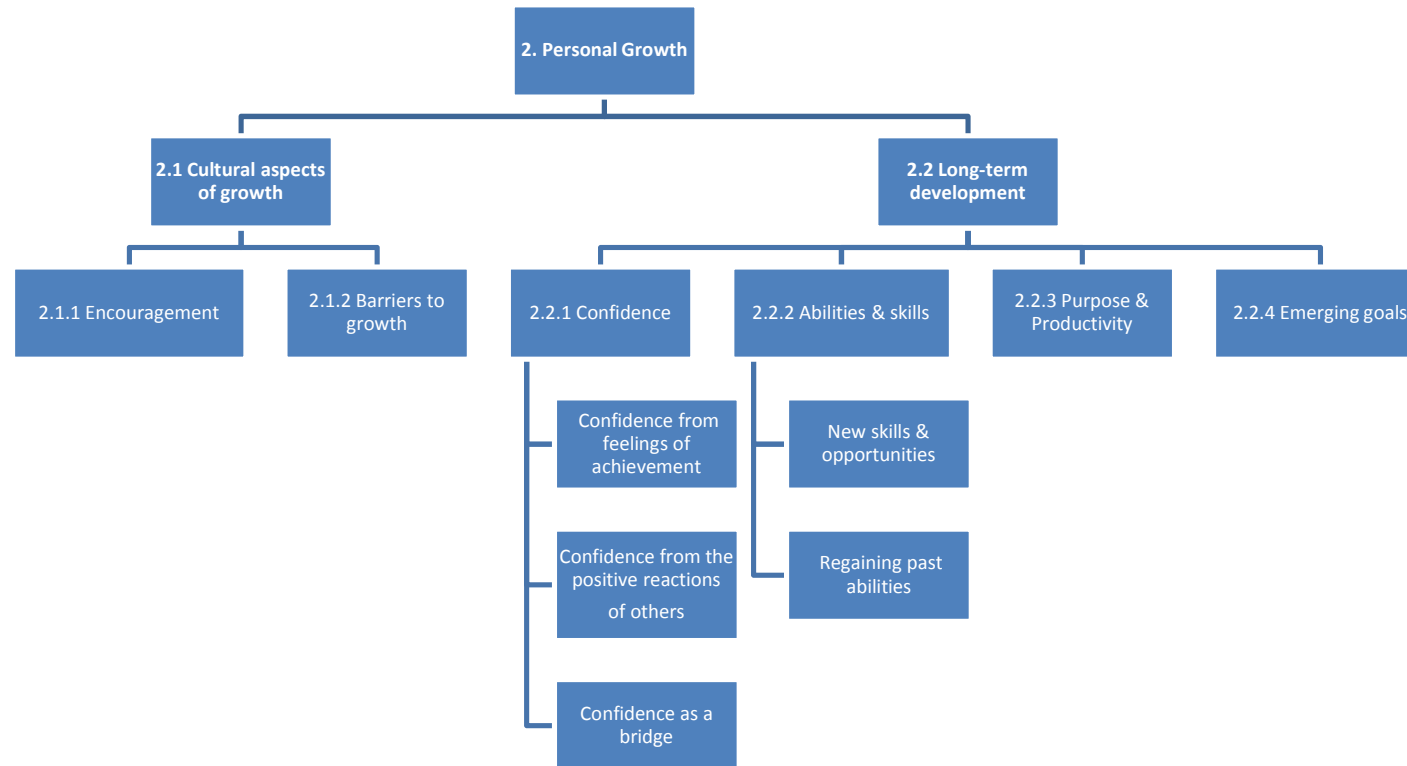
- The first theme – *Freedom from expectation* – captures the finding that a central meaningful aspect of art group experience was a perceived sense of freedom that spans both ‘doing’ (in terms of actions) and ways of ‘being’ at the art group (in terms of presenting the self). A multi-dimensional picture of art group experience emerged from analysis of data that was interpreted to cover the culture, processes and impacts of experiencing freedom from expectation.
- The second theme – *Personal growth* – represents art group experience as a trajectory of individual growth that spans realms of increased confidence, skill development, having a purpose and goal setting. This theme provides a retrospective insight into art group members’ perceptions of personal change over time.

Diagrams 1 and 2 (overleaf) organise these two superordinate themes in terms of their division into major themes and sub-themes. The diagrams show that the meaning of art group experience was related to facets of culture, process and impact. It should be noted that themes are presented as separate categories for the purposes of reporting, but that themes were found to inter-relate to convey a process of art group experience. This process is detailed later in chapter 4.



**Diagram 1: Freedom from expectation: Order of themes**





**Diagram 2: Personal Growth: Order of themes**

## **Freedom from expectation: Superordinate theme 1**

Rather than remaining a general theme, perceived freedom from expectation was found to fall into two different facets when analysed: Freedom to *do* and freedom to *be*. Freedom to *do* was interpreted to mean a freedom from the pressure and constraint of imposed standards, regulations or routine. Freedom to *be* was linked with no perceived pressure to conform to pre-defined ways of being, in terms of factors such as mood or sociability. These major themes, and their sub-themes, now presented.

### **1.1. Freedom to ‘do’**

As diagram 1 illustrates, participants described a sense of *freedom to do* from two main angles; the first angle was related to aspects of the group in terms of culture and ethos. The second angle was related to the processes and impacts that participants experienced both within group time and in wider life contexts. In order to convey the difference between these two facets of experience, they are presented as separate sub-themes; however, both of these angles were found to interrelate and are therefore connected by the overarching major theme, *freedom to do*. These sub-themes are now presented and their interrelations are discussed later in chapter four.

#### **1.1.1 A culture free from pressure and constraint**

*The beauty of the art group is that you can do what you want. (Janet)*

All art group members described a valued sense of *freedom to do* when at the art group. In the above extract from Janet’s interview, the “*beauty*” of the art group was interpreted to convey a central meaningful feature of experience. Other participants were found to describe this perspective in terms of what the art group

gave them freedom *from*; that is, a perceived freedom from the expectations that can be imposed by others.

Describing the art group in terms of what it gives relief from, rather than what it adds, meant that participants identified the points on which it differed from other common experiences. In particular, contrasts were made with other participatory groups. This may have been an easier way to convey the essence of a group culture, given the inherent difficulty associated with trying to define the abstract and implicit ingredients that make up social norms and values.

A group culture where there was freedom from the expectation to 'do' was interpreted to be conceptualised in two main ways: freedom from the *pressure* of expectations to conform to any preconceived standards or set programme at the art group, and freedom from the *constraint* of expectations, which some participants perceived there to be at other participatory groups:

#### ***Freedom from the pressure of expectations***

Geraldine, Keith and Janet valued freedom from the pressure that the expectations of others can impose. Making the most explicit link between expectations and pressure, Geraldine described the group as being "*a non-pressurised group where you can express yourself.*" (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview). When asked what this meant, she went onto describe a freedom from expectation:

*There's no...I was going to say no standard...there's no expectation on that particular day at that particular time. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Although Keith did not make such clear links between pressure and expectation, he used the word pressure repeatedly when describing the expectations of teachers at other groups:

*There's no kind of pressure to do this particular kind of art in this particular fashion...there was a teacher at the xxxx\* resource centre and he would want you to do that and there was a pressure to do that...and I think he was a teacher more on the professional qualification side of things. Here, I don't feel any pressure; I do my art at my own pace." (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Like Geraldine, Keith perceived that expectations of him by others invoked a feeling of pressure. In the extracts above, both Geraldine and Keith repeatedly used the word “*particular*” when talking about the expectations of others; Geraldine used it to convey having to do art on specific days and at certain times, and Keith related it to having to do specific kinds of art. This conveyed a perception that the pressure of expectations to conform to predefined plans is rigid in comparison with the flexibility to do art that is self-directed at the time of art group attendance. Concurrently, however, having a total freedom to self-direct art activity is something that Keith also expressed difficulty with:

*I can get into such white fright you know looking at a blank piece of paper and....you know...and then he [art group member] comes in and he'll just sit down in front of a piece of paper and he'll draw anything that comes to mind. He's not pressurised to do anything, you know, he'll use any medium that's available and he's quite happy to do it. (Keith; 2nd interview)*

This extract added an interesting dimension to Keith's experience in that it conceptualised *freedom to do* as an expectation in itself; that is, Keith still felt a pressure to do *something* at the art group even although he perceived a sense of freedom over the actual artwork.

Interestingly, Keith saw a difference between himself and the other member in terms of the response that was evoked when faced with the same situation of

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\* Location removed to protect anonymity

having a blank piece of paper. Whereas Keith said he could go into a “*white fright*” from a feeling of pressure to create something, he perceived the other member as being non-pressurised by this situation. This suggests that Keith may put pressure on himself rather than sensing it from the group atmosphere. On the other hand, Keith’s perception of *freedom to do* at the art group might just not extend to ‘doing nothing.’

For Janet, however, freedom from the expectation to do was also about the ability to ‘do nothing’ and be comfortable with it:

*There’s no stress to do anything. You can just blether and have a cup of tea if you want. (Janet)*

With the phenomenon being about experience of an activity, a perceived freedom to be non-active was seen as Janet’s way of expressing an ultimate freedom; that is, a perception that *even* non-participation in a group, that is set up to be participatory, was acceptable. Although the reference to having a “*blether*” links to later findings that art group experience includes social dimensions, this statement seemed to convey more about a freedom from expectation than it did about social interaction.

### ***Freedom from the constraint of expectations***

Although the previous sub-theme relates to art group members who saw *freedom to do* as meaning a freedom from pressure, Doug and Kate instead talked about a sense of relief from constraint. For Keith, *freedom to do* was about both freedom from pressure and constraint. These members contrasted freedom from expectation with a sense of constraint at other groups and in other situations. In this sense, participants described the art group in a way that was relative to other aspects of life.

Doug contrasted the art group with his previous perceptions of art:

*It has changed my outlook on art anyway. I never knew it could be a wee bit more fun than it was before because when I used to take art at school I thought it was just like drawing landscapes and, you know, drawing people and all that sort of thing...like sort of being proper and upright sort of thing where you have to sit there and draw everything by looking at it, but it can be anything you can draw ...anything...you don't exactly need to be Picasso to enjoy it. (Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Most notably, Doug described his past perceptions of art in terms of being constrained by expectations to do art in a particular way (*"you have to sit there and draw everything by looking at it"*). He likened this constrained view of art to *"being proper and upright."* In contrast, he described a *freedom to do* at the art group:

*You can sit there doodle away, do what you feel, what you want.*  
(Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

The reference to being able to *"doodle,"* as opposed to having to do particular types of art (drawing *"landscapes"* and *"people"*) appeared to convey an ultimate freedom in being able to create and self-direct artwork. This served to strengthen the contrast that Doug was making between the art group and his previous notions of art that seemed to originate from art in his schooldays.

Keith also compared his experience of art group freedom with the constraining nature of expectations and, like Doug, he spoke about the rigidity associated with art in other contexts. Also like Doug, he, referred to another art class as *"proper."* The concept of an art group as being *"proper"* was seen as imposing constraint and

restriction that would be difficult to keep up with or conform to. This was further interpreted from the following extract:

*I feel ok when I'm here, I feel good when I'm here. If I was in a proper class...with thirty or forty people... it's a clinical kind of view of art...I wouldn't be able to...and it puts a time constraint on you...and a constraint to keep up with other people in the class. There's not that here; you do it at your own pace, you do the art that you want to do. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Keith's repeated use of the words "when I'm here" was seen to underscore the specificity of freedom from constraint; that is, as it only being experience at the art group. Like the previous sub-theme, it was expectations to conform to predefined expectations that were seen as inducing a constrained and restrictive atmosphere.

Kate also contrasted the nature of the art group with other art and craft groups. In a similar vein to the perception that "proper" groups impose expectations, her perception was that other groups were "professional:"

*I think it's just the chance to do some art that you wouldn't have the chance to do anywhere because you...I mean, I've looked at posters for various art and crafts groups and you think well they're all professionals, you know. And you wouldn't go there, but you would here. (Kate; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In Kate's case, the perceived freedom and opportunity to attend the art group was contrasted with perceived restrictions in attending other art groups; that is, her expectation that 'you have to be a professional.' Although Kate was the only participant to explicitly say that she "wouldn't go" to other groups, both Keith and Doug also conveyed a sense that the constraints of "proper" art would deter them from going. Other groups were seen as superior to the art group, and this appeared

to induce a feeling of social exclusion in terms of the groups being perceived as non-accessible.

### **1.1.2 The processes and impacts of freedom to do: Management of feelings**

Whereas the previous theme was focused on data in relation to the culture of the art group that allowed a sense of *freedom to do*, this sub-theme represents findings in relation to the processes and impacts of engaging in art activity whilst perceiving *freedom to do*.

#### ***Expression of feelings through art***

Data from Geraldine and Doug's interviews were interpreted to suggest that engaging in art activity when there is a perceived *freedom to do* means an ability to express feelings through art by self-directing art activity. This was found to be a process through which participants experienced a spontaneous desire for art and then came to experience positive feelings after expressing themselves through their chosen artwork.

Expression of inner thoughts and feelings through art was most apparent in Doug's interview. In the following extract, Doug makes a link between 'feeling' and 'doing', with art as a behavioural outlet for what he described as his "*mind*."

*You can sit there doodle away, do what you feel, what you want...you can sit there and do what you feel like. Anything that's in your mind that day.*  
(Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Doug alluded to the changeable nature of thoughts and feelings, and valued the ability to express whatever emotions might have been present on the day of the art group. Furthermore, it was self-direction of art activity that appeared to aid the process of his self-expression through art. In particular, Doug's references to being



able to do “*what you want*” and “*do what you feel like*” suggested a fundamental *freedom to do* that underpinned the process of self-expression.

Geraldine alluded to the sometimes spontaneous nature of desire for art when she contemplated her reasons for initial attendance at the art group. The interview appeared to be the first time that Geraldine had thought about the why she one day “*suddenly*” wanted to paint:

*Geraldine: I just came along because I knew I wanted to paint and I didn't know why but just suddenly I wanted to paint and I couldn't do lots of the things that I'd done before...I'd never written any poetry or anything before. I couldn't do what had been my usual things and I don't know why I just wanted to paint. So I had no big plans – I just wanted to get some paint on paper and do messy things.*

I: Right. And do you think that was a way of expressing yourself or just something that you wanted to do?

*Geraldine: It probably was...I think it was just I needed to do something with my hands, you know, to... I suppose it was just to get something out of my system that I couldn't get out in words maybe. And I just wanted to do it and I didn't know what I wanted to do – I just thought 'paint.'*(Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Although Geraldine contemplated that her desire to paint was about a need to “*do something*” with her hands, she also considered that art, or paint in particular, may have been an outlet for feelings that were difficult to articulate. Geraldine's reference to wanting to do “*messy things*” could be reflective of confused or disorganised thoughts and feelings.

Geraldine then went onto explain that the art group leader picked up on her spontaneous desire to do “messy things” and facilitated her in choosing an art material that suited. It was this description, captured in the following extract, which was interpreted to mean that *freedom to do* at the art group allowed the process of self-expression to happen:

*It was just a small group and he [former art group leader] said “what do you want to do?” And I said, “I don’t know, I want something gungy and sticky [laughs] and I didn’t even know acrylic paints existed and he said “oh have some of this it’s like toothpaste” [laughs] and that started me off. And then, well, he encouraged me...well encouraged us - all of us - and the others...we encouraged each other. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Geraldine and Doug also provided insight into the way that they felt when engaged in art, taking the theme further to show the impacts of being able to self-express through art by having *freedom to do*. For both participants, self-expression was interpreted to result in feelings of escapism. This was explained most explicitly by Geraldine:

*Geraldine: I don’t kind of think what I’m going to do, I just do whatever happens and I do that in the art. I don’t really plan it out. I just do what comes out of my hands and I do the same with the music and create something.*

*I: So you like the chance to just be...sort of spontaneous?*

*Geraldine: Spontaneous and it sort of just takes you right away from everything else. You’re in another little world when you’re doing music or art; it takes you out of the realism into some sort of imaginative place. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

The first part of the extract suggests that Geraldine engaged in art in a way that expressed whatever she was feeling (*"I just do whatever happens"* and *"what comes out of my hands"*) and in the second part of the extract Geraldine described what was interpreted as feelings of escapism (*"you're in another little world...out of the realism and into some sort of imaginative place."*) In essence, *freedom to do* led to self-expression and then to feelings of escapism.

Taking the link a step further, Geraldine went onto describe a change in the way that she felt before and after the art group. It can be interpreted that her description of raised spirits is the result of the positive processes of expression and escapism:

*Geraldine: You can come to art feeling one way and go away feeling totally different from when you've come. I always go away feeling better than when I've come.*

*I: When you say you feel better, in what way?*

*Geraldine: Well if you've come feeling really low and not very great then after you've done art, been here and gone away, you don't feel like that anymore. It raises your spirits. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

The journey from self-expression to escapism was also found in Doug's interview, albeit not so explicitly. More notable was the contrast that he made between feelings of escapism at the art group and feelings of boredom when elsewhere:

*You can sit there and draw away and it takes you into another place without, you know, sitting there bored out of your mind. It takes you into a place*

*you've never been before...it opens new doors for yourself. (Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Doug's reference to being taken to "*a place you've never been before*" and the opening of "*new doors*" suggested movement and progression within his state of mind, which was contrasted with the more stagnant situation of "*sitting there bored out of your mind*" when not doing art.

At other points in Doug's interview, the progression in his state of mind was about escapism from distress and worry, rather than escapism from boredom:

*It's [the art group's] a good thing because it de-stresses me out quite a lot and it doesn't put me in a position where I'm, you know, in distress and it just, sort of like, vanquishes all the distressment out altogether. It relaxes me more than anything else so when it hits the middle of the week I'm thinking 'grand it's the middle of the week I can sit for once and relax without worrying' and all that sort of thing...It just sort of mellows me out basically. (Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Notable in these two extracts, and throughout Doug's interview, was repeated reference to being able to "sit." This was interpreted to be conducive to feelings of relaxation that Doug described. Like his description of escapism, a feeling of relaxation seemed to be specific to being at the art group, which was conveyed through his reference to being able to sit "*for once without having worrying thoughts*." It was hypothesised that his concentration on doing the art that he enjoyed (*freedom to do*) allowed him the rare opportunity to sit whilst experiencing a positive state of mind. Alternatively, and in light of the data on self-expression, it could be interpreted that worrying thoughts still occurred, but that the art provided an outlet for them. Furthermore, the extract shows that, like Geraldine, there was a change in the way that Doug felt before and after the art group. Whereas Geraldine

had described the change in terms of her spirits being lifted, Doug's reference to feeling mellow suggests that meaning of change, for Doug, was a relaxation of mood.

### ***Responding to feelings through art***

*Freedom to do* at the art group, for Geraldine, Sheena and Keith, allowed a match between art activity and feelings. Rather than being about self-expression, however, the ability to flit between different art materials was seen as responsive to unpredictable desires for art as well as varying concentration levels. Ease of access to art variety was therefore seen as important. It became apparent, however, that, a once-a-week art group was not always conducive to this desire and participants spoke hypothetically about the ways in which permanent and open premises would allow 'in the moment' desires for art to be acted upon.

Geraldine explained that a permanent room would also mean a wider variety of art materials, which was seen as particularly instrumental in helping with concentration difficulties and recovery from mental health problems:

*I mean sometimes you can't concentrate for very long on one thing. If you could move from one thing to something else, it would maybe help, especially in the earlier stages of being in...recovery or whatever you call it. I mean I know you can go to a different picture or whatever, but you could go to a different medium if you had more and it was all set out there ready then you could just move from one thing to another – but that's an ideal...unless you've premises that couldn't really happen. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

The value that Geraldine placed on the "ideal" of permanent art premises so that the art is "all set out there ready" conveyed a sense that better ease of access to a variety of art materials would be more responsive to the changeable nature of

mental health. A permanent set-up would seem to extend the concept of *freedom to do* to a higher level by allowing engagement in art at any time.

In her second interview, Geraldine provided further insight into the ways in which concentration difficulties can affect engagement in art, but also explained how her ability to concentrate increased as she tried different mediums before settling on one that best suited her mood. Although permanent art premises were seen as an ideal for concentration difficulties, the once-weekly set up of the art group still seemed to offer a variety of mediums for Geraldine to try before settling on something that suited:

*So I was very unsettled today, I can't settle to do anything, I don't know if I'm going to settle down to some art but I was like this last Monday, I was very unsettled and I came in and I had been so...I couldn't concentrate on anything at home, I was like a butterfly going from one thing to another and I've been like that this morning, then I noticed that I was like that to start with but once I had actually got the paint in my hands then I was concentrating on that and I did get into it. So I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't had the chance to paint, I would still be flitting about like a butterfly.*  
(Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Having *freedom to do* in the sense of having art variety, and a link with concentration, was also interpreted from data in Sheena's interview. She explained that experimentation with a variety of art materials resulted in her being able to better focus on her artwork as the session progressed:

*Sheena: It's like, first of all...first, I don't know, say half an hour or so you find it's really difficult to do anything and then suddenly it just becomes more...just sort of easy.*

*I: It all opens up?*

*Sheena: I mean, well it depends. Not for everybody but...but you just have to experiment and the more you try, the more, you know, you find out wow, wow, I just want to keep going for about four or five hours. (Sheena)*

However, Sheena referred to a different art group as providing better opportunity to engage with a variety of art materials until her concentration level improved. She contrasted this with the art group being restricted in its ability to provide the same:

*We need much more. I mean I keep going on about the one in xxxx\* but, you know, they have boxes all-round the room with different things...buttons, and you can just go and help yourself to millions and millions of things. Whereas here, it is a bit limited. I think that's to do with the funding isn't it? I don't know, I don't quite understand it all. But certainly, yeah, there is...there are more materials there and it's great. Just go round the room and take something out a box, slap it down on paper. (Sheena)*

For Sheena, ease of access to art variety appeared to give more *freedom to do* and, in turn, this allowed her to be responsive to the way that she felt at the time of the group. With the art group apparently lacking the variety that Sheena valued, she identified a resulting difference between the two groups in the way that she was able to engage in art:

*Sometimes I can't do anything, but that's a lot to do with me not sleeping properly or whatever. And other times, you know, I can do a whole picture from beginning to end. But, I find that when I go to the other one [art group] I can do that very quickly, but that's a different situation because I get, total, all of my tension out. (Sheena)*

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\* Art group external to charity – location removed to protect anonymity

The “*different situation*” of the other art group appeared to be about her access to a wider range of materials, which enabled Sheena to go through the process of trying different mediums before concentrating on doing one thing. Being able to “*do a whole picture from beginning to end*” can be surmised as allowing the release of tension that Sheena describes. Furthermore, she appeared to value the experience of being able to undertake this process “*very quickly*.” This was also conveyed in the previous extract when Sheena seemed to value the ability to “*just go round the room and take something out a box, slap it down on paper*.”

A liking for a quick art process is a view that was also expressed by Keith:

*Sometimes, if you get a set of instructions for a programme for installing on the computer of something, and you have to through the whole booklet of how to set this up and everything...you flake out after about maybe four or five pages, because it's so complicated. Simple things are the best things I think. If you can set it up in five minutes, you can...But if it's going to take you an hour and twenty minutes, you know you're [makes a noise to convey frustration]. I mean I use colour pencils because I can just instantly dip into the bag, take the right colour pencil and I can do that. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Keith's extract does not explicitly explain why an instantaneous ability to engage in art was valued. In the wider context of his interview, however, it appeared that he also experienced concentration difficulties. Coupled with the reference to his frustration at looking through instructions, it was interpreted that Keith found trying to concentrate for lengthy periods a stressful experience. Art that was quick and simply to set up meant that Keith was able to avoid the frustration of trying to concentrate.



## **1.2 Freedom to ‘be’**

In addition to a perceived freedom from the expectation to ‘do,’ participants also conveyed a strong sense that their natural mood or behaviour was accepted by the group. This was interpreted as a valued freedom to ‘be’ rather than ‘do,’ although the relationship between the two facets of experience is discussed in chapter 4.

Like *freedom to do*, data in relation to *freedom to be* is presented in two different categories of 1) culture; 2) process and impact. In terms of culture, participants described the ways in which they had experienced group acceptance of their natural self without having to conform to the expectations of others. In terms of process and impact, participants were found to describe what it means to engage in the art group without experiencing an expectation to be a certain way. These two major themes are now presented:

### **1.2.1 A culture of being accepted**

Like the previous sub-theme, a cultural sense of *freedom to be* was conveyed by making contrasts between the art group and other group situations. Different from *the culture of freedom to do*, however, was the more positive focus amongst participants on what the group added rather than what it gave a relief from. More specifically, the sub-themes below represent an overall positive sense of group acceptance.

It was interpreted that participants experienced two main facets of group acceptance: 1) A sense of acceptance regarding the self. More specifically, this was about the changeable nature of the self because of mental health problems and normalisation of behaviour during times where participants experienced particular difficulties; 2) acceptance of ability – this was found to relate to art abilities but also abilities in other domains, which suggested a more general sense of a culture free from judgement about personal capabilities.

### ***Acceptance of the 'changeable self'***

Geraldine and Sheena gave powerful accounts of their perceived ability to 'be themselves.' More specifically, they conveyed a sense of group acceptance of mental health problems and changeable moods.

In Geraldine's second interview, she spoke about an ability to be "*however you are on the day:*"

*I felt very isolated yesterday and today and I knew that if I came down here I'd be alright and I wouldn't have to be brilliant...I mean I wouldn't have to feel brilliant or anything but I would be with people who understood. You don't have to justify everything; you can just be however you are on the day. If I'd gone out and said to somebody "well I don't feel great today" you get lots of questions that they don't really understand. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Not having to *explain* the way that she felt was particularly meaningful to Geraldine; *freedom to be* therefore meant the ability to be with people without verbal interaction and the experience of this as being understood and accepted. She had previously described a similar perspective in her first interview when *freedom to be* was interpreted from value placed on not being expected to talk:

*You don't have to speak. If you're in a drop in or something you kind of feel...it's [the art group is] something you can do and be with people. It's not just the kind of art bit of it. Or even if you don't sometimes know what to say. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Interestingly, this extract underscored the premise that Geraldine still placed value on social interaction ("*it's not just the kind of art bit of it*") even although verbal interaction was often difficult ("*you don't sometimes know what to say*") Furthermore, it suggests that it was the particular combination of 'art *and* social'

that was comfortable for Geraldine. Although not fully explicated in the extract, Geraldine made contrasts with the charity's general drop-in facility where her perceptions of social expectations were different. Whereas a drop-in was perceived as having a primary and overarching expectation of social interaction, the art group provided a more natural social benefit that appeared less socially invasive for Geraldine. Her reference to not having to explain the way that she felt or acted was further interpreted to mean an ability to control self-expression of feelings.

Sheena conveyed a similar view of *freedom to be*; however, she placed more emphasis on acceptance of feelings that *were* expressed through emotional behavior like crying or having a "screaming fit:"

*I mean sometimes I've been in a terrible state. I arrived last week and I was crying my eyes out completely, and I couldn't stop. But, it was just one of these things. But the nice thing about everybody here is that they just...help you...you can do that. The people...you can do things like that, they don't...you can be natural, just be yourself. You can come in and have a screaming fit, or you can come here...and people come in all sorts of moods. People feeling like committing suicide. Or whatever they're feeling, they can come and they won't be cast aside or treated badly. (Sheena)*

This powerful extract conveys an interesting difference to Geraldine's description of *freedom to be*; rather than a freedom over non-expression of feeling, Sheena felt a freedom to express difficult feelings and perceived that other people at the group could do the same. The extract suggests as a strong sense of the art group as non-judgemental of mental health problems and, more specifically, an acceptance that the nature of mental health can change from week to week at the art group.

Sheena also suggested an acceptance of a changeable need for social interaction at the art group and this was related to her changeable living arrangements. When

Sheena was in hospital, her need for social interaction at the group when less than when she lived on her own at home. When she expressed a liking for “company” in her interview, this was probed to ascertain whether it was the most important aspect of art group experience for Sheena:

*I: And do you think probably the company is one of the most important...*

*Sheena: Company?*

*I: Yeah*

*Sheena: Well, I don't know. I mean, at the moment, I'm not feeling too sort of like ...well, you can sort of sometimes feel very lonely...I think I felt lonely when I was I was in my house. That three-bed roomed house, which was quite creepy. So I found that pretty hard, but...certainly, I certainly feel very...no, it's the art and the company. Both for me. Oh yeah, yeah. Both. (Sheena)*

Although Sheena did not finish the sentence that starts “*I mean, at the moment, I'm not feeling too sort of like...*” her residence in a psychiatric hospital (at the time of the interview) meant that she experienced less feelings of isolation than she had before. She therefore reflected that engaging in art activity was just as important as engaging socially. Sheena reflected on a time in the past where her need for social support was greater and, interestingly, expressed a different view where “company” was the most important aspect of art group experience:

*Sheena: Being with other people is very good: I love company, I love people. A lot of us have been put away in our own little flats or boxes after xxxx\* [closure of psychiatric hospital]. People were put away in boxes...I was one of*

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\* hospital name removed to protect anonymity

*those ones included. A lot of my friends died and... I suppose I survived the system. I'm still here, but a lot of people sadly didn't survive the system with their injections and whatever they were given. Em...but...what were you saying to do with the art group?*

*I: What you like most about it...*

*Sheena: Yes, just total company, being with people.*

This extract conveyed a time where Sheena experienced significant loss and social isolation. In light of her previous reference to art and social being on an equal footing at the time of the interview, it was interpreted that thinking back to a time where she felt significant isolation meant that the social nature of the art group became more prevalent in her mind at that moment.

When taken together, the two extracts convey a sense that *freedom to be* means group acceptance of changeable needs and a flexible art group where Sheena could draw on different aspects of it at different times. Perhaps in order to strengthen this notion of fluidity, Sheena makes a stark contrast with her experiences of psychiatry which she sees as rigid and judgemental:

*I mean, it [the overall charity] saved me ... from the awful dreadfulness of psychiatry, which I'm in at the moment. I'm in a hospital at the moment, but there's too much labelling going on. You know, it's very wrong to call people manic depressive, schizophrenic. It's putting them all into boxes. Too many control freaks in this world. (Sheena)*

Sheena defines diagnostic terms as “labelling” and the charity as ‘saving her’ from this type of categorisation. “Labelling” and being put into “boxes” by “control freaks” suggests strong feelings of being judged into categories that are static,

whereas the art group was more flexibly perceived as respecting and accepting people as changeable.

The impact, on Sheena, of experiencing *freedom to be* in terms of being able to 'be changeable' was interpreted as being about the ability to progress from a negative to a positive state of mind when at the art group:

*Sometimes I'll be in a mood that I can't...well, I can't even open up but that doesn't really matter. Sometimes I just do a...like last week, I just did a black screen. You know, a black picture, and that wasn't very nice. Well, it wasn't nice but then I started putting the colour on it. Christine [the artist] told me how to put... you know, she said "why don't you put it on the wall?" And then I could look at it from a distance and I hadn't done that before. And I hadn't done that before, actually sticking it on the wall." (Sheena)*

Whereas the previous extracts are about group acceptance of difficult and changeable mental states, this extract goes a step further to describe how the acceptance can lead to help and support to progress through difficult ways of feeling. Firstly notable in the extract is that Sheena's natural self was accepted when she turned up at the art group; conveyed especially by the words that her mood "*doesn't really matter*." Secondly, with the guidance of the artist, Sheena appeared to progress from a dark and closed mood to an ability to experiment with her art and progress with her picture. The addition of colour to the picture seemed to aid her process of engagement in art in a similar way to the aforementioned value that she placed on experimentation with art materials. It can also be interpreted that sticking the picture on the wall and looking at it from a distance allowed Sheena some perspective on the way that she was feeling. Pivotal to this experience was acceptance and support from the artist, who can be seen to play a key role in setting the scene for a group culture of acceptance.

### ***Acceptance of abilities***

Freedom from the expectation to conform to pre-defined plans for art resulted in a perceived sense of acceptance in terms of art ability. Geraldine and Kate both valued the freedom to create something without the quality of the product being expected or judged:

*It doesn't matter what you paint or what it's like. If something goes right that's fine and if it doesn't go right it doesn't matter. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

*Well I think it's a way of expressing yourself ...you know, and ...because it's a simple group, you're not afraid of somebody looking at you to see what you are doing. You...so if you're making a mess it doesn't matter. I just enjoy coming. (Kate; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Kate's reference to the simplicity of the art group resonated with her aforementioned perception of other art groups as “professional” and non-accessible. When she compared her abilities within the art group, however, Kate still saw her own skills as inferior to those of other members. In the case of the art group, however, this had not deterred her from taking part. This suggested that it was not simply the abilities in a group that led Kate to attend or not attend; instead, it was group acceptance of a perceived low ability that was important:

*I mean I'm not really all that great at art ...I know that the other three that are there today are much better than me. But I don't feel awkward or anything like that because we just all...we don't make anyone feel any more awkward, you know. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Interestingly, the reference to not making “anyone feel any more awkward,” suggests that Kate was aware of other people's feeling of awkwardness even

although this was not a feeling that she attributed to herself. There was a sense, through the word “we” in this sentence, of group sensitivity to feelings.

Geraldine also conveyed a sense of awareness in relation to other people’s awkwardness. Through describing the inherent difficulty in communicating the characteristics of a group culture in order to encourage attendance, Geraldine further underscored the group’s acceptance of any art ability:

*I think that it’s encouraging people or persuading people that it actually doesn’t matter if you’ve never done it before; that it’s just for fun and it doesn’t matter... you don’t have to be good to come. I think that’s a difficult thing...is getting people in the door that are afraid. Getting over the fear of coming in if they’ve never picked up a paint brush before or a piece of clay or something but I don’t know how you can improve that; we try and keep it as easy going as we can... I don’t know. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Freedom from expectations about ability was sometimes about capabilities that were not specifically art-related. When Geraldine’s general sense of *freedom to be* was probed in her second interview, it became apparent that she contrasted the way that she felt at the art group to times where she had perceived that her capabilities were being judged. A perceived discrepancy between her own and other peoples’ ideas about her capabilities had clearly caused her some distress:

*Geraldine: You don’t have to be anything, you can just be you. Nobody says “why?” or “what”? Well if they do, it’s alright because you don’t have to justify anything. You can just be having a bad day and nobody queries it and they do accept you as you are.*

*I: What do you think makes you feel like that at the group?*



*Geraldine: No expectation, no pressure, no pre-conceived ideas of what people think you can do. No assumptions...well with me it's the expectation that you're a certain level of anything. How can I put that? I think that when I went to the schools with the music, that was what was different; what was being expected of me is something that I couldn't actually manage, that other people thought was really easy but because things aren't easy - nothing's easy - it was difficult to me. You see what I mean? Whereas to somebody else it would be probably very straightforward...It was just a small group, but they'd asked me to go and play in little schools...It wasn't anything big but I found it too much and I absolutely panicked and I froze, not because of the lady who was in charge of it, she was lovely, but because of her expectation of what would be easy for me wasn't. And I couldn't do it and then I felt a failure and then it starts all over again. So... and it took me...well I'm still recovering from... I'm still getting back to where I was before that. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract is powerful in its illustration of the intense difficulties that Geraldine found when people imposed expectations on her that she felt unable to meet. Although this perception evidently linked with a pressure to 'do' as well as 'be,' Geraldine went onto explain that it was other people's acceptance of her as a person that led to a feeling of freedom from expectation:

*There's no preconceived idea of what you should be like because you were upstanding and you were a teacher and all these things that people have this image of what you are, but in actual fact they're labels and they're not...and you don't come up to their expectations but here you don't have to...nobody expects anything so it's alright. You can't fail. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract shows that people out-with the art group could impose expectations on Geraldine that she saw as originating from past abilities that had created a false

image of her as a person. On the other hand, Geraldine saw the art group as free from these expectations and a valued inability to therefore “fail.” This contrast served to underscore the art group as having a unique culture where freedom from expectation was about *freedom to be* in terms of the abilities that can come to define who someone is as a person.

### **1.2.2 The processes and impacts of freedom to be: A sense of commonality**

This theme is intended to capture the experiential process of art engagement and its personal impacts when there is a perceived acceptance of *freedom to be*. Overarching this section is the finding that a cultural sense of having *freedom to be* led to a general sense of commonality with other people at the art group. In other words, being able to ‘be yourself’ led to participants realising that there were similarities between themselves and others at the art group. Concurrently, the relationship between *freedom to be* and a sense of commonality also worked in reverse; that is, having something in common with others led to more of a perceived ability to ‘be yourself.’ In each of the sub-themes themes below, both directions of effect are evident.

Three main sub-themes were identified. Firstly, it was found that *a sense of commonality* with others at the group means that participants can experience *buffers to social exclusion and stigma*; secondly, it was found that it can open up *shared lines of communication* within a context where socialising with others can be difficult; thirdly, it was found that a sense of commonality can allow participants to experience feelings of *empathy with others* at the art group.

These three sub-themes represent the different angles from which participants can describe an experience; from the positive view of what the group has added or from the view of the negative aspects that the group offers freedom from. Feelings of empathy and experiencing shared lines of communication fell into the former

category, whereas having a perceived buffer against social exclusion and stigma fell into the latter.

### ***Buffers against social exclusion and stigma***

A sense of having *freedom to be* appeared to be uniquely experienced at the art group, which led to feelings of being buffered against social exclusion and stigma. Contrasts were made between the group and life outside by both Kate and Keith. Kate differentiated between feelings of alienation outside of the art group with a sense of commonality at the group:

*If you've got mental health problems there is still a stigma and as soon as people get to know they think 'oh,' you know, you feel kind of alienated. Yet when you're with a group of people...we're all similar, we're all doing the same things. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Kate felt stigmatised and alienated by people's reactions when they learned of her mental health problem. In contrast, being with others at the art group who she perceived as "*similar*" appeared to give her a freedom from these negative social encounters.

The impact of perceived stigma on Kate was a notable pressure to keep her mental health problems invisible when not at the art group:

*You know that other people in the group have similar problems as yourself, so you know that you don't have to put up a front or hide where you would normally have to put up a front if you were in the outside world...so that nobody would know that you had any mental health problems. You just relax and you're just yourself because you know everybody's the same. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

In the art group, Kate appeared to sense a shared understanding of mental health problems and therefore a *freedom to be* in the form of freedom from the stigma of mental health. By calling life outside the art the “*outside world*,” and particularly within the context of perceived stigma, it was interpreted that the art group provided Kate with a safe space that acted as a buffer against stigma.

Keith also perceived a strong sense of social exclusion and stigma in life outside of the art group and made similar contrasts. It was found that Keith engaged in social activities outside of the art group, but with another member. The following extract captured both of these points:

*Keith: I don't have many people that I know who are considered so-called normal, or whatever.*

*I: Right...*

*Keith: Whatever that word is; I don't know. It's a definition I wouldn't apply to anybody.*

*I: No.*

*Keith: Because everybody's different.*

*I: Of course.*

*Keith: But it's the societal perception of being normal. So I don't really have... I mean I don't socialise in xxxx\*<sup>\*</sup>; I can't socialise in xxxx, you know, for fear of discrimination and stigma...*

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\* location (home town) removed to protect anonymity

*I: Right...*

*Keith: A fear of...you know, of being attacked; not maybe physically, although there is that risk, but verbally particularly. So I don't go out in the evening at all. I mean I, I've got lots of things to do at home...I have other activities that I do sometimes; occasionally I have gone swimming, I went swimming for quite a while with a member from xxxx [the charity]\*. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Keith evidently spent a lot of time in the home, although this was not interpreted negatively. A sense of social exclusion was therefore more apparent than a sense of social isolation. Like Kate, a perceived sense of social exclusion (including fear of consequence) deterred Keith from attempting to engage socially in life outside of mental health contexts. Interestingly, the one activity that he did enjoy in life outside of the art group – swimming – he did with a fellow member. Keith later explained that being with someone from the group made him feel more able to engage with the 'outside world' and it was a sense of commonality with this person that aided the process. It can be surmised that the support of someone he saw as similar to himself was a coping mechanism for feelings of being socially excluded.

By calling those in the 'outside world' the "*so-called normal*," Keith was questioning the whole concept of normality. Yet, this did not extend to a view of similarities between those with and without mental problems; rather, Keith went on to make distinction between the ways he could relate to people with and without mental health problems:

*I've been around people with mental health, and physical health difficulties, most of my life. People with Down's syndrome who I find much easier to communicate with... there's a tendency in small towns and particularly in*

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\* Charity name removed to protect anonymity

*rural towns for the stigma and the discrimination to be ingrained from one generation to the next, to the next and so on where they see people who are different from them as abnormal...and it sticks. And that level of intolerance is, you know... that's why I prefer to be around people who have mental health difficulties because I can relate to them and I also find they're much more intellectual than intelligent. Some of them have great skills. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Keith evidently saw social exclusion of people with mental health problems as strongly ingrained in the society around about him. By saying that stigma “sticks” Keith conveyed a sense that people’s impressions of him could be difficult to change. Later in his second interview, Keith explained the ways in which being socially excluded affected his behaviour in social settings, which he contrasted with the *freedom to be* that he felt at the art group. Most notable was the finding that Keith had to adapt his sense of self to act out a pretend persona when in other social situations:

*Here you can be yourself...yeah I mean I don't have to pretend to be someone else. If I was going to some other class or something that was more structured or walking into like a social scene like an event or something like that or you know, a bar or restaurant or something else, then I feel that I have to put on a persona, you know create a...like a shield coming down in front of my face. Like a mask, like I'm wearing a mask and if I'm in a particular scene that's full of like the art hoi polloi, I have to put on the persona of being someone who's knowledged in the art hoi polloi. So I might do a little bit of research beforehand or try to find out a little bit more about the event, you know, so that I can put on that persona. And I did; so when I was at the xxxx<sup>1</sup> conference I put on a kind of persona, the face, you know and that really wasn't who I am. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

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<sup>1</sup> Conference name removed to protect anonymity

Keith's references to the art "*hoi polloi*" resonated with the theme *freedom from the constraint of expectations* where it was found that other art groups can be seen as superior or professional. There was consequently a hint of social exclusion already noted from participants' views of other groups. In this extract, however, Keith's sense of social exclusion extended further to include general social scenes. With the feeling that social exclusion was inherently 'everywhere,' this, again, suggested that the art group was a rare break from the negative experiences of everyday life. Yet, Keith also described instances where being with people with mental health problems could also be stressful. On the one hand, attending mental health groups has given Keith what he identified below as an "*acquired circle of friends*;" on the other hand, Keith had found the mental health difficulties of other people difficult to manage:

*There are benefits and drawbacks [to attending the art group]. The benefit of coming is that I...you know... I have got an acquired a circle of friends You know xxxx\* who you saw out there, he comes to my house because he just lives round the corner and we sometimes walk up into Tesco and do a bit of shopping so we meet outside of the drop-in. I've got other people that I meet in the drop-in here and sometimes, sometimes when there've been in crisis they have impacted...so you've had to take a step backwards and say "no I can't really deal with this outside the drop-in, I can only deal with it here." (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Elsewhere in his interview, Keith explained that he found it easier to offer support to people within the context of the charity because the staff were able to help him. This conveyed the art group, for Keith, as a safer space to engage socially even with his friends.

### ***Shared lines of communication***

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\* Art group member – name removed to protect anonymity

Whereas Kate and Keith described a sense of commonality in terms of the freedom from social exclusion that it gave them, Doug and Geraldine spoke about the way it could open up shared lines of communication. Like the previous theme, they contrasted this experience with times where they did not feel that they had anything in common with others, meaning that hints of social exclusion are also apparent in this theme.

The art group as a shared interest provided Sheena with a topic of conversation that she could engage in:

*Some people you don't have that much in common with, but if you're doing something together like art, you've got something in common that you can actually talk about. You can talk about different things and you make friends like that, perhaps with people that you perhaps wouldn't ever have anything else in common with. And that's nice. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

A shared topic of conversation was something that was particularly meaningful to Geraldine and led to the development of friendship. Interestingly, she saw art as the only aspect of common experience that she had with others at the group; mental health experiences were not mentioned.

The following extract in Geraldine's second interview gives the comparison to her experience at the art group by capturing the lack of connection that she felt with the 'outside world:'

*I don't actually feel part of the general world at all. That's part of the problem. I don't feel that I've got anything in common with the general world because I don't have a job and go to places. When you're meeting people they usually ask you what you do and these sorts of things and I haven't got anything to kind of relate to. It's better now because I can say*



*genuinely I'm retired, I retired early, but I still haven't got an awful lot in common with a lot of people. If I go to the art it's quite good because they don't ask things like that, they go for the art. But an ordinary group of people, to socialise in is quite hard. I haven't...well I don't feel that I have got anything in common. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

In life outside of the art group, Geraldine felt a lack of common ground and, at the same time, a pressure to engage in everyday topics of conversation, such as employment. In result, she felt less likely to engage with people outside of the art group and this made her feel unrelated to what she deemed the “*general world*.” This can be seen as a vicious cycle where Geraldine’s lack of engagement with people outside of the art group further served to heighten her sense of having nothing in common with others. Yet, there was a hint in Geraldine’s interview that she felt she could be wrong; at the end of the extract she starts off to say “I haven’t gone anything in common with others,” but changes track to add “*well I don’t feel that I have got anything in common.*” This suggests that Geraldine was questioning her perception.

Doug felt that a common interest in art opened up natural lines of communication outside of the art group. It was clear, however, that this was still about communication with art group members that he might “*bump into*:”

*Doug: You’ve got something in common with somebody else and you can meet new friends and new people you’ve never met before who you wouldn’t think twice of speaking to when you’re along the high street or something...*

*I: So you’ve got something in common because you’re all there for the art?*

*Doug: Yep, so, we’ve got, like, a common interest...at least it’s not another stranger in the street basically...and something you can talk about if we*

*bump into each other in the street or if we see somebody we know...we're out in the pub having a pint and we can sit there and talk about, you know, what we've done. (Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

The contrast that Doug made between art group members and “*another stranger in the street*” suggested that, like Geraldine, he felt unrelated to life outside of the art group. Also like Geraldine, communication with others about art evidently provided Doug with a valued line of communication (“*something you can talk about*”).

Meeting new people, however, was not something that was interpreted as negative for Doug. Whereas meeting a new person outside of the art group was described as a “*stranger in the street*,” the art group provided him the appropriate context to approach and meet new people. In this sense, it was interpreted that having a shared activity eased Doug’s engagement with new people. As was found in Geraldine’s interview (in *acceptance of the changeable self*), Doug valued the dual process of engaging in art whilst being sociable:

*It gets you to meet, you know, new people as well. That’s one of the other main points I came as well...you know, just to share...well stories as well as art materials. (Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

For Doug, his initial attendance at the art group had social purpose; however, he valued the experience of art *and* social as a dual process when he talked about sharing “*stories and well as art materials*.” It can be interpreted that having shared lines of communication about art eased Doug’s development into friendships and, conversely, developing friendship with people interested in art gave Doug more opportunity for shared lines of communication. This bi-directional relationship between art and social activity seemed particularly meaningful for Doug.

### ***Empathy with others***

In Sheena and Keith's interviews, a sense of commonality meant having feelings of empathy with other people. For Sheena, there was a sense of affiliation with people interested in art;

*I think Christine, the teacher, is very very good. I get on very well with her, I can understand her...a very eccentric person...which I love. I just love artists and musicians and they're the people I love most. (Sheena)*

In the wider context of life outside of the art group, however, Sheena perceived a lack of interest in art, which she thought affected art group attendance:

*I mean obviously it would be good if more people come along, but you would never expect that in xxxx\* at all, especially this drop-in. Most of the people, a lot of them just aren't into...aren't into art, which is fair enough for them. You know, they're into different things but, you know, it's not a very arty town. (Sheena)*

In both extracts above, Sheena made repeated use of the words “the people” when referring to artists and then to the perceived ‘non-arty’ population outside of the art group. This was interpreted as Sheena making a contrast between the two groups, both in terms of their cultural relationship with art and their perceived personality characteristics. In terms of culture, Sheena perceived there to be differences in the groups in terms of their attitudes towards art. In terms of personality, Sheena saw “arty” people as eccentric, which was a trait that she could identify with. In this sense, Sheena appeared to experience a sense of commonality with artists.

Later in her interview, Sheena also referred to “the people” when describing the art group:

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\* location removed to protect anonymity

*I like the people here. I like the people that come to the classes. I get on well with them all so...I've known them for a long time... I do like them and they're good people. (Sheena)*

Sheena referred to the members as “good” people, which conveyed a particular sense of positive regard for those interested in art. In a similar vein to describing artists as “eccentric,” it also created a picture of a group that is united by positive personality traits.

Keith also described a sense of empathy, although it was related to people with mental health problems rather than those interested in art. This led to him being more likely to socially engage with people with mental health problems than anyone else:

*I stick to xxxx\* [the charity] because I find that people who go there, who have these problems, who...who struggle with life, I can relate to them. Not only can I relate to them, I can understand them, they can understand me. They...we can empathise rather than sympathise, which I think...sympathy is a kind of pseudo form of, you know, of care, of being...it's like pretending to care when you don't really care. So sympathy I think is, you know, it's like the old thing from the film Alien when Ash says to Ripley, “you have my sympathy when you're up against the monster,” you know. Rather than giving any practical advice about how to get rid of it. So... that's what I feel about sympathy. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This powerful extract conveyed the art group as a place where Keith can experience a sense of empathy and be positively affected by the empathy of others. People

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\* charity name removed to protect anonymity

without mental health problems (and life outside) were perceived to have sympathy rather than empathy, which, in comparison, Keith found both unhelpful and false.

## **2. Personal growth: Superordinate theme 2**

The second superordinate theme to be interpreted from the interview data was that participants expressed art group experience as a trajectory of personal growth. Like the first superordinate theme (*freedom from expectation*), it was found that participants talked about the culture of the art group; this time, it was about a culture of encouragement that facilitated change and growth (theme 2.1). Secondly, it was found that participants gave meaning to their art group experience in terms of the ways in which they had changed over time (theme 2.2).

### **2.1 Cultural aspects of growth**

When talking about personal growth from attending the art group, it was interpreted that members saw aspects of art group culture as pivotal to supporting their development. A culture of encouragement was found to be particularly meaningful. Participants made contrast to life outside of the art group in the form of perceived barriers that were seen as hindrances to attending the art group and therefore making personal growth. The following two sub-themes for theme 2.1 capture both the facets of encouragement at the art group and barriers to encouragement that were seen to exist in life outside of the art group:

#### **2.1.1 Encouragement**

Participants often related positive change in their abilities and outlook to valued experiences of encouragement at the art group. Encouragement came most notably from the artist. For Janet, this had led to her overcoming a personal fear or phobia:

*I don't like messy things and especially getting my hands dirty so a great milestone for me is that I've overcome my thing about getting messy. I also never used to like abstract type pictures but now I know that you don't have to have things that look like anything for it to be art. It's taken a while to realise what art is. Christine [the artist] is encouraging but not pushy; she plants a seed and lets it grow. I wasn't so keen on the person before, in fact I*

*was a bit scared of him. Christine is quiet and unassuming, which I like. There is help if you want it but she gives you your own time. (Janet)*

From this extract, it can be interpreted that it was the nature of encouragement that appeared to be key for Janet; gentle and “unassuming” encouragement that allowed her to be comfortable enough to overcome a difficulty in her own time. The description of encouragement as a “seed” that was planted by the artist conveyed a sense that personal growth was encouraged and perhaps initiated by the artist, but that the actual growth was ultimately participant-led. This premise was further expressed when Janet adds, “There is help if you want it.”

Later in her interview, Janet conveyed a sense that her personal growth – in this case, overcoming a fear – was something that was ongoing rather than resolved:

*I used to use baby wipes to wipe my hands but I don't do that now. I would like to give everything a go and get two hands dirty – I'll give anything a go with Christine's [the artist's] encouragement. (Janet)*

As well as highlighting the positive change that Janet found so valuable, this extract also underscores the motivation that she developed for general change. By being able to “give anything a go,” it is suggested that making progress in one area had led her to perceive the possibility of further growth. By saying “I'll give anything a go with Christine's encouragement,” Janet expressed that her individual change and growth was still contingent on that key sense of encouragement by the artist.

When reflecting on her experience of initial attendance, Geraldine also spoke about encouragement from the artist. The following extract was used earlier to exemplify Geraldine's ability to express her feelings through art; however it also demonstrates the encouragement that Geraldine felt at initial attendance:

*It was just a small group and he [former art group leader] said “what do you want to do?” And I said, “I don’t know, I want something gungy and sticky [laughs] and I didn’t even know acrylic paints existed and he said “oh have some of this it’s like toothpaste” [laughs] and that started me off. And then, well, he encouraged me...well encouraged us - all of us - and the others...we encouraged each other. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

The encouragement appeared to be pivotal in Geraldine’s progression from initial attendance to engagement with the art that she hoped to do. Interestingly, the artist’s encouragement appeared to lead members of the group to encourage each other. In this sense, Geraldine conveyed a supportive art group culture that radiated outwards from the artist to the rest of the group.

In her second interview, Geraldine expressed the importance of the group being led by an artist. It was the element of encouragement from the artist that was key to this perspective:

*It wouldn’t be the same if we hadn’t got Christine [the artist]. If we were to do art in a group that didn’t have a leader or a...I don’t like to use the word ‘teacher’ but somebody to encourage you. It wouldn’t be the same. I think you’ve got to have a leader I suppose, or whatever you want to call it. It’s not a ‘leader’ either...a facilitator. She doesn’t judge things, she may make a suggestion but nothing is right or wrong. But you’ve got somebody there to ask when you’re not sure about something, which is all the time. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

By seeing the terms “teacher” or “leader” as inappropriate for what she was trying to describe about the artist, Geraldine gave more insight into the valued aspects of the person facilitating an art group. Geraldine attributed characteristics of being non-prescriptive and non-judgemental to the artist as a “facilitator” of the group.



Like Janet, Geraldine appeared to value a gentle and non-invasive approach from the artist. In essence, this approach was, again, conveyed as participant-led and supportive.

### **2.1.2 Barriers to growth**

Although a culture of encouragement was apparent from participants' descriptions of the art group, this did not appear to extend to life outside in terms of encouragement to attend the group in the first place. Keith conveyed a sense of fear surrounding attendance, and a sense of frustration at the difficulty of encouraging attendance:

*The other aspect is to encourage people to come to the art class as well...there's other people that come, but it's difficult for them to come to the art. Some of them are on medication, and because of the medication they're on they find it difficult to engage in doing art because the medication inhibits them to do that. Or they're inhibited by where they live - the area - because they're living in a community that really is not used to people who have been institutionalised...living in a community where they feel ostracised, isolated, depressed, stigmatised, and a whole lot of other things that makes them paranoid and terrified of just even coming out of the front door to attend art classes. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In this extract, Keith describes both internal and external obstacles to attending the art group that could overshadow any attempts at encouragement. Internally, he identified side effects of medication and aspects of mental health, such as paranoia and depression; externally, the stigma of mental health in the 'outside world' discouraged people to even leave the house. In his second interview, Keith also talked about a perceived lack of expectation to recover from mental health problems unless through medication and this was identified as an additional barrier to attendance:

*You know, with a physical disability the expectation is to recover because it's a physical illness, something wrong physically with the body. But with a mental difficulty, if you go through a crisis or an emotional trauma of whatever kind; the expectation is, you don't get well. You'll never fully recover and the only way that you're going to recover is through a large amount of medication, which seems to be the be all and end all of things. And that suppresses many people's ability to do things, including art. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

For Keith, the societal perception that mental health is irrecoverable and only treatable by medication was a further barrier to personal growth that he saw as negatively affecting encouragement to engage in the art group.

Like Keith, Sheena also identified societal beliefs about the treatment of mental health as running contrary to encouragement to engage in art. When talking about the differences between the art group culture and the 'non-arty' culture outside of the art group, Sheena described a lack of focus on activities for those with mental health problems. A resulting sense of boredom within mental health communities was expressed:

*There's been no encouragement to do anything. It's not a very cultural place. I don't like xxxx\* very much at all. Lots of people have just been so bored here. They don't...they haven't been encouraged. A lot of, say people that suffer from...I don't even like the word 'mental health', but people that have problems, let's say, are not encouraged enough to do anything. You know....they just go for wee cups of tea in cafes and, to me, that's not good enough. My friend that lives in xxxx\*, she gets lots of encouragement for*

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\* Location removed to protect anonymity

\* Location removed to protect anonymity

*instance. She gets a lot of support. Three days a week...well three times a week, she gets encouragement. She's an artist and she gets lots of support with her art. I was never encouraged with my art by any of the...well people say 'that's nice' and everybody liked my work but... (Sheena)*

This extract shows that Sheena perceived a general lack of encouragement for people with mental health problems to engage in meaningful activity. She makes the comparison with a friend who is perceived to live in a place where art is valued and encouraged. This cultural difference affected the way in which Sheena perceived that her own artwork was valued; people appreciating her art was not in the same league as being actively encouraged with art.

Later in her interview, Sheena also contrasted encouragement to engage in art with a sense of stagnancy and constraint within mental health communities:

*The experiences that I've had...I've had some very up and down experiences in xxxx\*. Not very good a lot of the time ...stuck away in hospitals. And the only thing for me...well, to keep myself going...most people used to, sadly, smoke away and not do very much. And I suppose...three years ago, I was put in there from the withdrawal of lithium and then I did...I taught myself to...I kept painting. I painted and painted...to keep my brain going basically, when I was shut away in a hospital for two years. (Sheena)*

The description of being “shut away” was a powerful expression of constraint. A strong sense of inaction and stagnancy was also conveyed through the description of people ‘smoking away and not doing very much.’ This was contrasted with the positive movement forward that was inherent in Sheena’s description of art as ‘keeping her brain going.’ In this sense, art had acted as a coping mechanism that allowed Sheena positive growth and prevented the sense of stagnancy that she had

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\* Location removed to protect anonymity

witnessed in others. Notably, her perceived lack of encouragement with art in the wider community meant that art as a coping mechanism was essentially self-driven.

A further shared barrier to positive growth, although not cultural, was the uncertainty of the future of the art group. Like cultural barriers to growth, such as stigma, these were factors that were seen as largely unchangeable by members themselves.

## **2.2 Long-term development**

It was found that participants gave meaning to their art group experience in terms of the ways in which they had changed over time. Theme 2.2 is sub-divided into the different facets of growth in terms of personal benefits that participants were found to identify from attending the art group. These themes span developments in confidence, gaining abilities and skills, purpose and productivity and goal-setting over time.

### **2.2.1 Confidence**

A sense of increased confidence was found amongst all participants. The source and journey of confidence, however, differed amongst participants. Kate and Sheena saw it as resulting from feelings of achievement, whereas Keith, Janet Geraldine and Doug saw confidence as developing from times where they had experienced positive reactions from others towards their artwork. The third sub-theme in this section captures a divide between those who saw confidence as originating - and staying - within the group, as opposed to those who saw confidence as evidenced by the ability to go to other groups.

### ***Confidence from feelings of achievement***

For Sheena and Kate, an identified growth in confidence was related to times where they had experienced feelings of achievement and pride in their artwork. Sheena gave an example of a time where she had worked on a canvas picture:

*I did a big canvas and I just adored doing because it was a huge one, you know, and it was a really psychedelic one and, for me, I'm really into seventies stuff and, yeah, I felt that was a real achievement in a way.*  
(Sheena)

The feeling of achievement that Sheena reminisced about appeared to be related to the size of the canvas (which she described as “*huge*”) and the fact that it reflected her personal interests, or perhaps a time of particular meaning in her life (“*the seventies*”).

For Kate, however, confidence was related to a more general sense of being able to achieve something for herself:

*Kate: I think it helps you're confidence if you find that you can do something, or at least that looks not too bad...you think oh I've achieved something...I can do something.*

*I: Do you think it's confidence in general or confidence in artwork?*

*Kate: I think it's confidence, to do something...that you know you're not... in the past, you know you've not been very good at. To go and discover well you can do wee bits of this and wee bits of that. (Kate; 1st interview)*

This extract shows that Kate valued the experience of finding that she was able to do something that she had previously felt less able to do. A sense of standing

corrected, in terms of her own perceptions about her abilities, was apparent. Later in her interview, Kate expressed a sense of disbelief at being able to create artwork:

*Kate: It just gives you a bit more confidence and it's something different to do, you know. It does give you more confidence, you know, and you take back a piece of work and think 'did I actually do that?'*[Laughs]

*I: So it's something that you've achieved?*

*Kate: Yeah, yeah*

*I: And that's the main thing, that's the most important thing for you...*

*Kate: Yeah, I would say, yeah (Kate; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

A strong sense of achievement is apparent in this extract. Furthermore, Kate classed the realisation that she was able to achieve something through art as the most important part of her experience. In her second interview, Kate talked about how realising her achievements at the art group helped her to feel more generally confident at engaging in an activity within a group context:

*It [achievement] gives you more confidence because you don't feel such a failure. You know, you feel that you can do something, you know...the other things [other activities] you sort of do on your own; the art, you're doing with people and sometimes you're kind of scared to do something with people incase 'oh you're not any good at it' and other people are. Whereas here, when you find out that you can achieve something, then you're not just so scared to do something in front of other people. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

By contrasting her sense of achievement with feelings of failure, and conceptualising achievements as a realisation that “*you can do something*,” it is interpreted that Kate felt a general sense of inability to achieve in her wider life context. Feelings of achievement, and a resulting increase in confidence, appeared to be experiences that were unique to art. The extract then leads into a sense that confidence also meant an ability to more comfortably undertake activity within a group context. A fear of failure meant that undertaking activity in front of others was initially difficult for Kate, whereas experiences of achievement had eased the process and fear of failure.

### ***Confidence from the positive reactions of others***

Throughout Keith’s interview, he was keen to show me his various achievements with art. Although this was a way of illustrating his experience at the art group, Keith seemed to value my positive reactions towards his work. The act of showing his artwork was also therefore interpreted as a way of receiving praise.

Keith was the only member to show me his artwork; however, Janet reflected on the positive reactions of other people towards her work:

*I wanted to do a picture that I was proud of and something that I finished off; nothing specific. I’ve done that and I showed it to my mum who was so pleased with it that she said “that’s lovely” so I got it framed for my mother and mounted. I was really proud and over the moon that my mother liked it so much. I was showing it to anyone who I saw. When you’re on your own you don’t really get praise for anything so it’s nice to get praise. (Janet)*

Notable in this extract is that the experience of art achievement inherently meant that participants had a visible end product that could invoke praise from others and a resulting internal feeling of pride. Janet appeared to place particular significance on the pride that she felt after being praised by a significant other (her mother), but

also suggested that she would value the positive reactions of anyone (*"I was showing it to anyone that I saw"*). At the end of the extract, it was interpreted that experiences of praise were particularly meaningful within a context of living alone.

Praise was then linked to feelings of confidence when Janet spoke about a time where she had taken part in fundraising for the art group. Rather than a sense of new found confidence, Janet had re-gained the confidence in a previous ability. Again, the experience of positive reaction from other people was something that appeared particularly meaningful:

*I helped raise money by selling my knitting to the general hospital – that was good because I got my confidence back in knitting as well as raising money for the classes. People were saying 'that's lovely' so I got praised for my knitting. (Janet)*

Geraldine also made a link between positive reactions from others and increased confidence. When asked where she thought an increased confidence had come from, she reflected on the positive reactions of others:

*Well it [increased confidence] must have been from being able to achieve something here because I've never ever painted a picture before so... I mean apart from when I was little, and I never did art at school so it must have come from other people's appreciation that's given me a bit of confidence and acceptance. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

At the end of this extract, Geraldine suggested that the positive reactions of others resulted in feelings of being accepted. Although theme 1.2.1 was about the conditions of the art group that create a culture of acceptance, this finding was about positive experiences that were internalised to produce feelings of acceptance.



Appreciation of his artwork was also something that Doug experienced; however, positive feeling came most notably from having the confidence to show off his artwork in the first place. In this sense, Doug placed more value on having the confidence to actually point out his achievements to other people than he did on the reactions from others. When asked what having more confidence meant to Doug, he described the way that he felt when he showed off his artwork:

*Not being frightened to show off any drawings to folk - it [the art group] gave me confidence for that. It boosted that side of confidence...and I can say to myself 'look what I can do' and all that kind of stuff. It boosted that kind of confidence for myself. I can sit there and think to myself...something like what's on the wall there. I can turn around to a friend and say 'oh I've drawn that picture...' So it has boosted my confidence in that way; saying 'look what I can achieve for myself.' (Doug; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

For Doug, being able to show other people a visible record of his work seemed to endorse, and perhaps make real, his own feelings of achievement. This was interpreted from the last part of the extract when, after describing his confidence at showing others his work, he adds, *"look what I can achieve for myself."* This line suggested that there was something about showing his artwork to others that underscored his sense of achievement. It can be interpreted that the link between showing others his art and feeling an increased sense of confidence was an experience of positive reaction that gave him a heightened sense of achievement.

### ***Confidence as bridge***

Geraldine, Kate and Keith talked about the way in which being in a group had given them confidence. Views of 'where' the confidence could take them, however, differed in terms of whether it was felt that it could extend beyond the art group context or not.

In her first interview, Geraldine reflected on the process of moving from the art group onto other groups:

*Now I can sometimes... depending on the size of a group, I can go into an ordinary art group...not big groups, I can't cope with a big group, but if it's a few...and I'd never have done that before. Its [the art group] kind of bridged me across from going back into...well say normal society - things that I wouldn't have been able to do. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Geraldine went onto describe how this development had led to an increase in confidence:

*I'm definitely more confident than I was eight or nine years ago and to be able to go out to another group is a big step and just enjoying painting. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Geraldine conceptualised the art group as a bridge that enabled her to branch out from a mental health context into non-mental health contexts (the latter of which she deems “normal society”). Increased confidence, for Geraldine, therefore meant the ability to progress on from the art group; something that she classed as a significant positive step forward in her life.

In her second interview, Geraldine expanded on the process of going from the art group onto other groups. Notably, her experience of exhibiting artwork appeared to have acted as a vehicle for this progress. The exhibiting of artwork can therefore be seen as the bridging mechanism between the art group and non-mental health contexts:

*Geraldine: My art has gone into other places, like it's been displayed in a church exhibition and I had one in xxxx\* exhibition and that sort of has made me go into different groups of people. I'd never have gone into those groups of people if I hadn't first of all done that here. I'd never have gone into an ordinary art club or an ordinary art group so from that point of view, yes, it has taken me more socially out.*

*I: So has it provided you with opportunities for other groups do you think?*

*Geraldine: Yes, it's sort of made the bridge, which is how I think of the art group - a bridge from being with mentally ill people all the time to being in an ordinary group - so I wouldn't have gone into an ordinary group like that had I not been to the art and done art. It's widened me a lot. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

As well as providing insight into the exhibiting of artwork as the specific mechanism by which a bridge can exist between groups, the extract took the concept further to suggest that Geraldine saw the art group as a means to an end rather than a long-term activity. When talking about her movement onto other groups, Geraldine explained that it was the safety of the art group that allowed her to gain the confidence to go onto other groups:

*I think it's all part of going out to another group of people; a different group of people. I think it's all part of the same thing. It varies but you've got to try it and I wouldn't have tried it if I hadn't been able to be here first. Sometimes it's alright and sometimes it's not and there's not really any way of always judging...but if I hadn't been able to come and do it in a safe group then I wouldn't have gone out and tried something else. I mean I did try, I managed a computer course as well and I don't think I would have tried that if I hadn't*

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\* Location removed to protect anonymity

*been in a group before. And I managed that, I mean it took me longer than other people to do it but I did manage it so that's a different sort of branch out. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extracts suggest that another key element to having the confidence to move onto other groups is having the art group as a safe base. This dual process of having the exhibitions as a bridge, and the art group as a safe base, provides interesting insight into the process by which Geraldine experienced, and then acted upon, feelings of increased confidence.

Although less of a focus in Kate's interview, she also talked about the art group giving her confidence to try other groups. As already reported, Kate had spoken about the sometimes daunting nature of doing an activity in a group; however (and perhaps because of overcoming this initial fear), she identified a feeling of confidence arising from group experience:

*If you're gaining confidence when there's people around you, you tend to take it out with you. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Kate described how was making further progress by gradually gaining confidence to 'be herself' at new groups. This was seen as another key step in the journey of progressing from the art group to other groups:

*I have just joined a club in the village that I've just moved into. Now I don't think a couple of years back or so I would have gone and done that on my own. You know, so I think it [attending the art group] does...it helps you...and I feel I could almost be myself ...you're still a wee bit afraid but I'm more relaxed now than what I would've been. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Like Geraldine, Kate's extracts suggest that the art group acted as a safe base that allowed her to gradually branch out to try other things. Until this point, she had made marked distinctions between the art group and the 'outside world' without there being a bridge between the two. The relationship between the art group and the 'outside world' therefore became more multi-dimensional than the previous, more simplistic, notion that the art group and the 'outside world' are not related.

In contrast, Keith saw an increased confidence as staying "within the group." In this sense, a perception of there being a collective confidence, which was kept within a mental health context, was expressed:

*The confidence is within the group...it's like we each have our kind of place in society and you know the people that come here tend just to come to places like this. So if it's not here it's the xxxx\* [other mental health organisation] or it's someplace similar to that. It's not someplace like going to college or going to university or going to art school or, or someplace. Some people do move on and have the confidence to do that but it's getting the steps to do it. It's taking the steps, and being helped to take the steps in some cases, and finding out the right information; I find that information - finding the right information- is often very difficult. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Keith's reference to, "we each have our kind of place in society" and "the people that come here tend to just come to places like this" suggested that he saw confidence as staying within a mental health context. It also suggests that Keith saw restrictions to taking confidence elsewhere. At the end of the extract he says that "finding the right information" can be a barrier. Elsewhere in his interview, this was related to information about how to move into employment.

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\* Service name removed to protect anonymity

In addition to some of the practical difficulties that Keith expressed about moving into employment, he also talked about the pressures that there can be on people to take up employment before they are ready. Keith suggested that there is a fear that engaging in art will convey a readiness for employment when people are actually unable to work. In this sense, it was interpreted that, for Keith, confidence within the group was also about having the assurance that art activity does not inherently have to act as a bridge to other - evidently stressful - aspects of life. Interestingly, like Geraldine and Kate, Keith also conceptualised the art group as a safe space; however, his perception of 'safety' was about being able to enjoy going to the art group without it leading onto other things. This implicit contrast shows how seemingly similar perceptions of the art group were found to have quite different meanings and impacts when more fully explored.

### **2.2.2 Abilities and Skills**

#### ***New skills and opportunities***

Doug, Keith and Geraldine contrasted their development at the art group with school days. There was an element of surprise that they could progress with art when their experience of art during school days had not been quite as successful. When contrasted with past attempts at art being unsuccessful, the art group was seen as providing a welcome opportunity to realise that skills in art could be progressed. The 'newness' of this experience was something that seemed particularly valued by Doug:

*It's given me something new to experiment with...It's given me a new experience basically, which I'd never had before because most people don't have the experience...you know, Christine [the artist] has got all the experience. You know, being taught by somebody like Christine, having the*

*chance to, you know, have a smaller group and get taught individually.*  
(Doug; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

For Doug, the premise of having opportunity (“*the chance*”) was related to the experience and skills of the artist, as well as the size of the group allowing one-to-one tuition.

Keith also pointed to the skills of the artist when talking about the notion of ‘opportunity.’ More specifically, he talked hypothetically about the artist being able to provide him with guidance on moving into academia. Notably, he placed particular value on having the “*option*” to pursue this route even if it never came to fruition:

*Christine [the artist] is also an artist in her own right. If I wanted to go more on the academic side I’m sure she would sort of give me pointers and tips and, you know, if I wanted teaching in that manner. She’d be able to teach me in that manner. You know, if I was doing a clay model, well this is the way I do it and this is how...this is the technique that works best for this particular drawing, or painting, or sculpture or whatever. I have that option to go that way. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

Geraldine also attributed her sense of opportunity to the skills of the artist and, like in theme 1.1.2 where art variety was conducive to progress, having opportunity to learn was also supported by a choice of material:

*I mean Christine [the artist] has got lots of different skills, which is good because she can take you into lots of different thing ....but I think it’s good to get a variety of... well, just choice and see what different things do. And there are lots of modern opportunities with materials that there weren’t*

*before...there's lots of different things to choose from. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Art variety, in this theme, is related to providing increased opportunity for growth. Like Keith's increase in choices with the routes he might decide to take with his art, Geraldine made a link between choice and opportunity, albeit with art material. Within this theme, there was therefore a common finding that increased opportunity meant increased choice.

### ***Regaining past abilities***

Some members also placed value on *regaining* capabilities that they had in the past. Although the following extract from Janet's interview is used in theme 2.2.1 about the positive reactions of others, it also shows how the art group helped her to regain confidence in a past skill (knitting). Raising money for the art group had shown Janet that she could be successful at something she had previously been good at:

*I helped raise money by selling my knitting to the hospital – that was good because I got my confidence back in knitting as well as raising money for the classes. People were saying 'that's lovely' so I got praised for my knitting. (Janet)*

Geraldine placed a great deal of value on being able to regain skills and abilities. She made frequent reference throughout her interview to her "*previous life*," which was interpreted to mean her life before developing mental health problems. In particular, Geraldine spoke of the satisfaction that she experienced in being able to help other people; a role that she saw as significant to her past.

*Geraldine: I feel I'm now able to sort of progress to helping other people do bits and pieces, which was what I was always kind of did in my previous life.*



*I: Right, so you can sort of go back and take bits out...*

*Geraldine: Take bits out and that I can use. I can use bits of my previous life now and I can help. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

For Geraldine, “progress,” appeared to mean regaining aspects of her previous life and being able to therefore “use” her previous life in a way that was helpful. Ultimately, it was the connection with a previous ‘helping’ role that was particularly meaningful to Geraldine. Once again, an exhibition had acted as the bridging mechanism. Although the bridge in this case was at first seen to be between the past and present (rather than between different groups) Geraldine explained in her second interview that regaining aspects of her “previous life” made her feel a connection to “the normal world:” This was interpreted as life outside of a mental health context:

*We were selling some of the cards we’d made and other things and I just felt that I was back into the normal world. It was nice; it was back into what I used to be doing, although I actually was very very tired...but I was back in the world that I used to be in, which was fine - that I enjoyed - not something that I didn’t enjoy. And when I went on the Monday morning I didn’t think I was going to be able to do it but I did manage it. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Geraldine expressed a satisfaction in this extract that, although challenging, she was able to accomplish skills from her past when she thought that she might not be able to. In the next extract, Geraldine describes how exhibiting her artwork had allowed her to realise the connection with her past, even although exhibitions were a new experience:

*Well doing the exhibition helped me realise that I still could do some things...I’d never done an art exhibition. I did lots of sort of sales and things*

*before and I didn't think I'd be able to do anything like that again. So although it was kind of different, it was a similar type of thing and it was ok and I managed it...so yes it made me feel useful again as if I wasn't just a piece of obsolete furniture. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract conveys what Geraldine's progress meant to her. The contrast between being "useful" as opposed to feeling worthless or purposeless ("a piece of obsolete furniture") was particularly powerful in depicting the change in feeling that Geraldine had experienced. Progress for Geraldine, however, was not without challenge and she spoke of the difficulties that she encountered in her development. There were times where she felt that she had pushed herself too far:

*Geraldine: I've spent a long time trying to get funds together, and do it with Christine [the artist]. It's actually had the tendency to put me off coming and actually just coming to do it. It's been such a struggle to persuade people that we need it... at the end of the day it's killed my... [Makes a noise as if struggling to articulate]*

*I: Do you feel that it's taken away from the enjoyment...just the art... focusing on the art?*

*Geraldine: Uh-huh, it's taken mine... and it's coming back but I think this is part...and Christine realises this...at the end of June there I was absolutely...I mean... and you just have to get somebody, or with me I suppose I'm very sensitive to these things...but somebody to criticise something and you think about how long it has taken to get this and then sometimes if people say "oh well we can't come" and you think well gosh we've put so much effort into it and then somebody's not bothering to come...you know... and they wanted it in the first place.... I liked it when I could just come and do it [the art] and I didn't have any responsibility...so it's not just about art, .it's learning about*

*me as well; that actually I can't do what I use to do and I mustn't try and do too much... and I realise that I have actually...I did do too much. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract shows that Geraldine also became aware of limitations to her progress and the ways in which some experiences at the art group could hinder, as well as help, her personal growth. Although her experience of reactions from others was previously related to praise, it was shown here that responses from other people (or lack of them) could also have a negative impact on development.

### **2.2.3 Purpose and productivity**

For the majority of participants, the art group had given them a sense of purpose and productivity. Geraldine, again, made contrast between feelings of usefulness as opposed to existing without purpose. Like in the previous theme, feeling useless was expressed as being *“an obsolete piece of furniture:”*

*Well, it's [the art group] made me...well it's this thing of making you feel like a person again as if you are a useful part of the community and not just an obsolete piece of furniture. You've still got a use. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Again, the contrast between being a *“person”* with a *“use”* as opposed to an *“obsolete piece of furniture”* was stark and conveyed the importance, for Geraldine, of having the art group as something that gave her a sense of purpose and connectivity to other people.

For Kate, Doug, Sheena and Keith, the meaning of purpose was more specifically about having purpose to the day. For Kate, having the art group to look forward to helped her to cope with the negative feelings she experienced from staying in the home. Kate had previously related 'having to stay indoors' with fear of stigma in the

outside world (*theme 1.2.2*). In the following quote, Kate conceptualises the art group as welcome compensation for staying in the home so much:

*You look forward to coming to it so therefore, you know...even if you're feeling a wee bit down. If you know it's art and you'll come to it, it's bound to help you stop feeling so sorry for yourself, you know, on staying in. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Kate then related the feeling of having purpose to the day to feelings of being productive. This was extended to her having the motivation to do other activities. Having motivation was suggested by the phrase in the following quote, "*it's in you now to do something:*"

*If you're on a right downer you don't have the confidence to go out or that, but, you know, if you're doing art you'll go out and you'll do something. It's sort of...it's in you now to do and do something even if it's only doing a wee bit of art in the house or that, you know. Or going out into the garden, or even just going for a walk. (Kate; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract shows that Kate's feelings of purpose and productivity at the art group extended to 'life outside' in terms of activities in the home. Doug, however, contrasted a feeling of purpose at the art group with the activities that he did in the home. In the following extract, Doug suggests that his time at home is relatively meaningless:

*Doug: It [the art group] gives me something to do with my time more than anything else. It gave me a purpose to do something...it gave me the...something to do of an interest....to do...it gave me something to focus on otherwise I'm sitting there basically twiddling my thumbs or sitting*

*watching TV or doing... you know, stupid stuff like that. So it gave me a sense of achievement for doing that. And a sense of wellbeing as well.*

*I: In what way?*

*Doug: It gave me like a sort of a purpose for doing something with my time...it gave me that to do...that's why it felt good. (Doug; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This extract conveys the art group as somewhere where Doug engages in meaningful and interesting activity that he could give his focus and which resulted in positive feelings of wellbeing from being productive. This was contrasted with a sense of boredom at home (*"twiddling my thumbs"*) and perceptions of home activities, like watching TV, as worthless (*"stupid"*) and unproductive. This resonated with the more general sense of boredom in the home that Doug had previously alluded to when he described positive feelings of escapism at the art group (*theme 1.1.2*).

For Sheena, having purpose to the day was discussed within the context of her stay in hospital, as well as her feelings when in the home. A strong sense of Sheena's liking for being productive was also apparent:

*I'm in hospital and it gives me...it gives me a purpose to the day. I like to have things to do, I like to...to work...I like to work. I mean I like to work hard really. I'm the type of person that almost...I mean, I believe in getting things right, you know, a perfectionist really. I like to get everything right. I do go to another art class on a Monday as well. As many as possible I try to get in my life. (Sheena)*

Later in her interview, Sheena linked the concept of having a purpose to the day with the notion of daily routine. She conveyed a gap of routine in her life, which art group had gone some way to filling:

*Well, for me, at the moment, I don't really have a routine. But I must admit, when I was living on my own my life was so stressful...I've got a three-bedroomed house and I live on my own in that house... and it's just such a strain. I mean, I don't want to be living there much longer because I was stressed out all the time in that house and I...and it was so big to manage and I couldn't think about the rooms...about...from one day to the next. At least in the hospital, I'm sort of thinking, well, I get lifts everywhere. I go down to the art class. Right, today's Wednesday, I'm going to go to this art class...but before, my life was just so scattered. I sort of, in a way, like having regular meals with people...sitting down at the table and I've got into a routine for five months. I've been in the hospital now...through no fault of my own should I say...but anyway, I won't go into that,...but... yeah, I mean I would just quite like a... more of a routine to my life...you know? I want a routine. (Sheena)*

Interestingly, this was the first time that Sheena talked about her experience of institutionalisation in a positive light. The element of routine that it had given her was evidently valued, and the routine of going to the art group formed part of this experience. In both extracts above, Sheena expresses a sense that attending the art group helped her to cope with her mental health problems by providing productivity, routine and essentially some structure to her life that gave her a sense of purpose.

Like Sheena, Keith also identified a sense of the art group providing purpose to the day. Rather than giving structure to his daily routine, however, Keith was more focused on the way in which the art group made him feel generally productive:

*I mean, I like coming along to the art group...I mean it picks me up a wee bit when I'm feeling down, you know, if I'm feeling low and if I do art for an hour or two I feel okay...I feel like I've accomplished something, I've done something. You know, I can go away and think great I've actually done something today. Whereas during the rest of the week or something like that, if I'm not working...or don't have any money, and can't do anything like go shopping or anything like that, at least I can do something and it gives me a purpose. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

This extract shows that Keith valued the sense of productivity after he had been at the art group. This experience appeared to change the way that he felt, which was notable when he said *"it picks me up a wee bit."* For Keith, the purpose and productivity that he experienced through art was contrasted with unemployment and financial barriers. Keith referred to these barriers being present in *"the rest of the week"* and it was therefore apparent that the feelings of purpose and productivity were an experience that was unique to his taking part in the art group.

#### **2.2.4 Emerging goals**

For all members, initial attendance at the art group had at first been experimental or inquisitive but had led to feelings of enjoyment. At this time there was no particular aim or expectations identified within their discussion of initial attendance. Instead, most reasons for attendance were related to a vague desire to create.

In a similar vein to Geraldine's aforementioned desire to paint, Janet wanted to create a non-specific product that she would value. Finishing a piece of artwork also seemed significant, perhaps in relation to the aforementioned value that participants placed on being able to show others an end product:

*I wanted to do a picture that I was proud of and something that I finished off; nothing specific. (Janet)*

When participants reflected on their experience of the art group at the time of interview, however, it was evident that they had more specific goals in mind. Although discussed within an awareness of funding limitations and uncertainty about the art group, goals were most notably about future aims or desires for different kinds of artwork:

*Geraldine: I've now got a thought that at one point... and it will be a long way ahead... that I would like to have an exhibition of my paintings and poetry and stuff. And I'd never ever have dreamed of ever doing that.*

*I: So you've got some personal goals now and ambitions...?*

*Geraldine: And I had nothing, absolutely nothing. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

For Geraldine, the contrast of having aims with previously having “*absolutely nothing*” was powerful. In her second interview, she elaborated on this point and contrasted the goals with sometimes experiencing a feeling of hopelessness:

*It [the art group] gives me something to aim for. Sometimes I wonder why I'm doing anything. “What's the point?” is a phrase I often use, so it has given me a point that I can work towards. (Geraldine; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Achieving goals, according to Geraldine, was some way ahead; however, Geraldine could see a time where goals might be accomplished and more stimulation with art would therefore be needed. She was unsure if the art group could provide this:



*I think eventually I'll want to get more...a bit more stimulation maybe than what is provided just now. But that again would depend on how the art group developed – if it developed and it had an exhibition and things and if Christine kept coming and we did some more...it would really depend. (Geraldine; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

This extract conveys a sense that, for Geraldine, movement onto other groups was not just about gaining confidence to do so (as presented in theme 2.2.1), but also related to a predicted need in the future for more stimulation than the art group could offer. In this sense, expectations for personal growth were contingent upon art group set-up. Again, exhibitions were mentioned; this time, as something that would offer the stimulation that was required to stay at the art group. This resonated with previous findings (in themes 2.2.1 and 2.2.2) that exhibitions represented a bridging mechanism between the art group and other activities. In the abstract above, exhibitions also represent goals.

Interestingly, Keith also talked about goals for exhibiting his artwork; this conveyed exhibitions as a landmark step of progress with art and an ultimate goal to work towards. Keith saw exhibitions as something that was achievable through group influence, as opposed to an individual endeavour. There was a sense that a perceived element of 'group power' had aided Keith's progress with art, meaning that goals for the future therefore became seen as achievable:

*You've got a chance that otherwise simply wouldn't be available to us. I mean, xxxx\* [the charity] is displayed in various galleries throughout the region and individually we would not have had a chance of looking to do that at all. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

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\* Charity name removed to protect anonymity

The realisation of the opportunities attached to being part of a group had led Keith to call for the group to get into wider scale exhibitions. At an individual level, Keith also had a goal of moving into academia with his art.

*I'd like to get back into the exhibition side of things again...see if we could get work displayed in a wider area...maybe to be recognised at some point, perhaps on a national basis as well, that would be nice. We've done things like calendars and cards and things like that. I've always wanted to have that elusive degree and I know people who have degrees and who have also suffered in their mental health...had relapses and things, ended up in hospital and found it difficult to get back into it again. (Keith; 1<sup>st</sup> interview)*

In addition to linking group endeavours with the individual goal of academia, the extract also shows the perceived barriers that Keith saw in achieving his goals. Fear of it affecting his mental health, as he has seen with others, was apparent. In addition to the limitation that Keith saw in progressing individually as opposed to group influence, barriers were also about Keith's fear of consequence.

Later in his interview, Keith also described the barriers he perceived as originating from a lack of support from other people. In this sense, external barriers to growth figured in Keith's discussion over goals in the same way as they did in relation to stigma (2.1.2) and confidence (2.2.1). In the following extract, Keith described the reactions from other people towards his goals:

*You know I think they're great [Keith's forms of artwork] you know and other people think that they're great. And other people within the organisations like xxxx\* [the charity] think they're great, but when I approach the other side of the area it's... I would like support from people who are knowledgeable in art; other artists, for example, to back me up and to help me. Saying you*

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\* Charity name removed to protect anonymity

*know, "I think this is great and I'm in the commercial field, you know" to back me up with some money and to back me up with some support saying "yes it is viable, it is possible." Rather than tell me all the time it's not. Because that's putting me down and puts, not just me down, but it puts everybody else down as well. (Keith; 2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Keith expressed a perception that the goals that he saw as achievable were often seen as unrealistic or unviable by others in more professional standings. A strong sense in this extract of a difference between the support that Keith experienced at the art group, as opposed to 'life outside,' was apparent. The extract also shows that Keith saw his own barriers – an overall feeling of being unsupported with art - as impacting on the rest of the art group: *"it puts everyone else down as well."* This is suggestive of personal experiences having collective impacts on perceptions about positive growth.

Interestingly, although Keith had previously valued the ability to attend the art group without it having to lead onto other things, there was a strong sense that moving forward with art (and using the art group to do so) was a clear goal for Keith. In this sense, it was interpreted that it was personal choice and control over using the art group as a bridge, or not, that was meaningful for Keith. In this sense, positive growth meant self-directed growth.

## Overview of themes

The findings of this study are interpreted to suggest that *freedom from expectation* and *personal growth* constitute two overarching facets of what it means to take part in community arts for mental health. Whereas *freedom from expectation* is about the perceptions of social norms and values at the art group, *personal growth* is about the individual and shared ways in which art group experience has led to personal benefit and change.

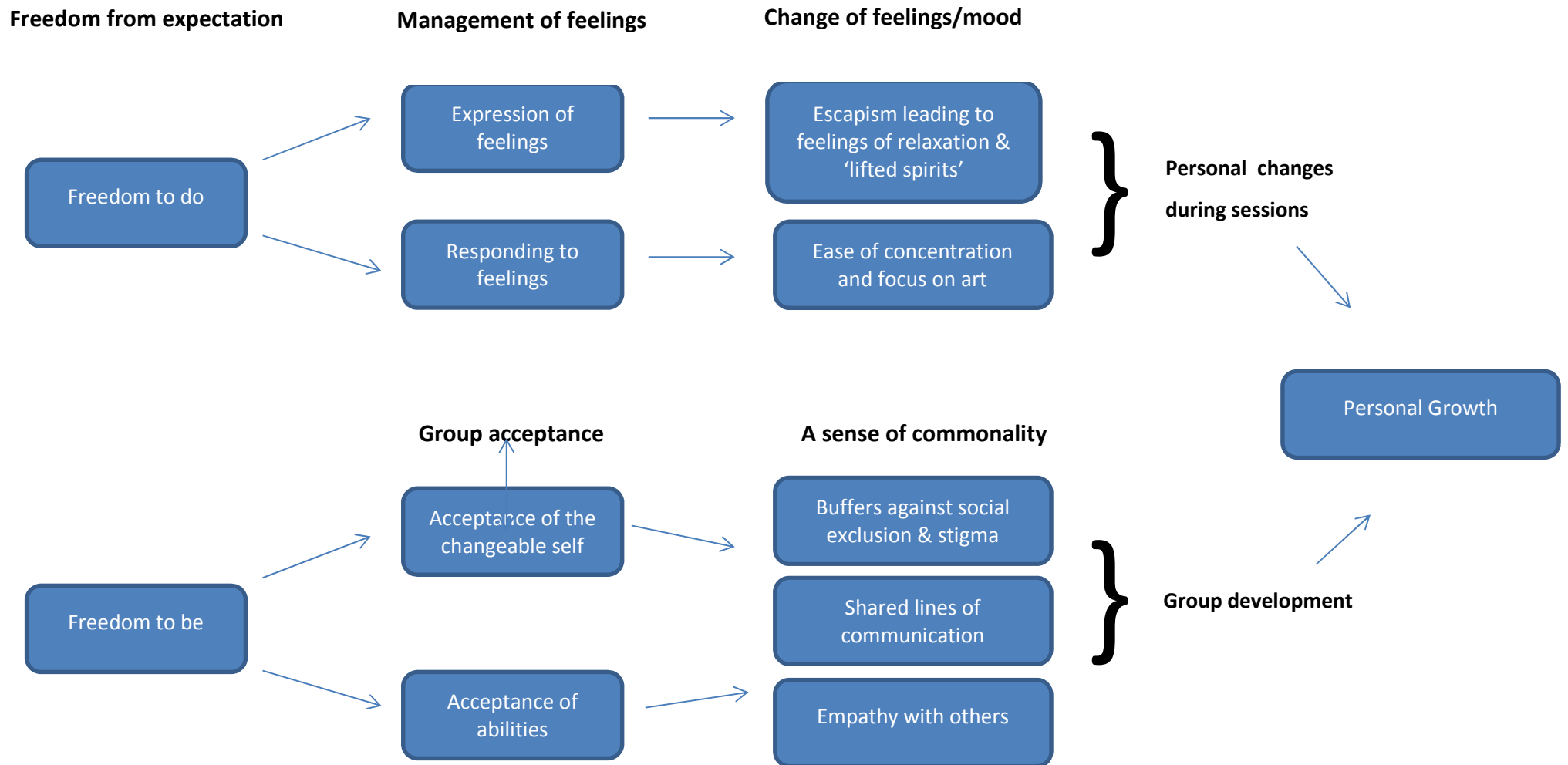
Within the broad thematic representation of *freedom from expectation* are shared and individual meanings of process and impact that allow, and facilitate engagement in the art group. The two main processes are; experiences of group acceptance (leading to an overall sense of commonality) and the management of feelings (leading to perceptions of change during art group sessions.) The development between the processes and impacts of experience is interpreted to lead to *personal growth*, which was found to constitute four main meanings in terms of change and develop from community arts; these are, increased confidence, gaining and regaining skills and abilities, a sense of purpose and productivity and the development of goals over time.

The connection between *freedom from expectation* and *personal growth* is therefore interpreted to represent art group experience as a process, which is detailed further in the next chapter and supported diagrammatically. In this perspective, *freedom from expectation* is the foundation for *personal growth* and it is an overall sense of freedom that fundamentally allows freedom to grow. This complex inter-relation between factors underscores the importance of gaining more sophisticated understanding about the ways in which community arts can link to mental health.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

This discussion chapter starts off by depicting and discussing the experiential process of community arts for mental health that was interpreted from the data. It then focuses on the two main superordinate themes – freedom from expectation and personal growth – and their links to the research literature under seven main headings that are interpreted as key points of discussion from this study. Finally, this chapter ends with a section on the overall conclusions of the study.

The following discussion represents the collective framework of thematic data that was found in the study. Following an IPA approach, attention is paid to individual divergences of meaning throughout this section; however, appendix 6 details the main areas of data where multiple representations of individual meaning were most commonly found.



**Diagram 3: The process of art group experience**

## 4.1 An experiential process

### 4.1.1 Overview

Community arts for mental health, in this particular study, span multiple aspects of participants' life contexts that were found to fall into two main aspects of meaning; that is, a *freedom from expectation* and a sense of *personal growth*. When taken together, these two superordinate themes further represent the meaning of art group experience as a process whereby particular 'ingredients' of the art group culture allow, and facilitate, positive change and long-term development (see diagram 3). Essentially, the link between the two superordinate themes is that *freedom from expectation* means that there is no perceived pressure from others for *personal growth* to happen. In this sense, it is having the freedom to change and develop that allows change and development.

A sense of *freedom from expectation* was interpreted to be an aspect of experience that was central to understanding what it means to take part in a community art group for mental health. The contrasts made with life outside of the art group provided an insightful exploration of the ways in which the perceived expectations of other people can evoke feelings of both pressure and constraint to conform to other people's notions of 'doing' – in terms of artwork – and 'being' – in terms of presentation of the self.

Going a step down from the superordinate theme of *freedom from expectation*, a *freedom to do* at the art group evidently gave welcome relief from feelings of pressure and constraint by allowing a fundamental ability to self-direct engagement with art. As diagram 3 illustrates, this allowed participants to manage their feelings; firstly, by choosing artwork that allowed an expression of feelings and, secondly, by responding to feelings through experimenting with various forms of artwork that facilitated the ability to focus and concentrate on art. As a result, participants

described the ways in which they felt they had changed during an art group session; feelings of escapism, raised spirits and relaxation were reported.

The second major facet of *freedom from expectation* – a sense of *freedom to be* – captures the aspects of art group experience that allow participants to feel accepted by the group. The meaning of being accepted at the art group was related to both mental health (*acceptance of the changeable self*) and art (*acceptance of ability*). As diagram 3 shows, group *acceptance* lead to an overall *sense of commonality* with others at the group. Three dimensions of *a sense of commonality* with others were interpreted as social benefits of engagement; that is, *buffers against social exclusion and stigma*, the gaining of *shared lines of communication* and a feeling of having *empathy with others*.

*Freedom to do* and *freedom to be* led to different processes of experience at the art group; whereas *freedom to do* led onto individual management of feelings during art *freedom to be* was about the collective experience of having *a sense of commonality*. It is the potential for participants to draw on both facets of experience, in a separate or combined way, that seems key to understanding the meaning of art group experience within a mental health context. When contrasted with experiences of pressure, constraint, social exclusion and stigma in life outside of the art group, being able to draw on both *freedom to do* and *freedom be* was powerful in responding to the complex and changeable needs of those with mental health problems. It is hard to imagine how groups without both facets could respond to mental health problems in a similar way. A general mental health group would presumably lack the *freedom to do* that is particularly associated with self-directed art engagement, and a general arts group (out-with the context of mental health) may lack the group acceptance of mental health problems that is pivotal to a sense of *freedom to be*. In essence, the art group fundamentally allowed participants a 'break' from everyday life by constructing a sub-culture that had unique ingredients for unlocking the potential of participants to experience change.



The second superordinate theme – *personal growth* – shows the different and multiple ways in which personal long-term change had been perceived to occur. The main facets of growth identified were in domains of increased confidence, having purpose and productivity, gaining and regaining abilities and skills and the development of goals. Whereas some specific links could be made earlier on in the process diagram (3) between aspects of group culture and process, it is interpreted that personal growth develops from a combination of managing feelings (from *freedom to do*) and collective experience of group acceptance (from *freedom to be*). In this sense, the process of art group experience appears to start off with specific links between group culture and process, but becomes more complex as personal growth is experienced over time. For example, the *personal growth* theme of *confidence* was found to result from individual feelings of achievement and experiences of praise. Common to both of these facets of experience is that a visible end artwork product is required for the experience to happen, which is likely to only be achieved from both the ability to self-direct artwork (*freedom to do*) and group acceptance in order to feel comfortable enough to engage in art in the first place (*freedom to be*). It can therefore be seen that, by tracking back the process of personal growth, it is a combination of the benefits gained from *freedom to do* and *freedom to be* that allows individuals to develop over time.

Without a longitudinal exploration of change, however, it is difficult to ascertain whether there are firmer links that may be made between particular individual and/or group factors and the four themes of personal growth that were found. Overall, interpretations of all links in diagram 3 are based on the retrospective reflections of art group participants over a lengthy period of time (engagement in the art group ranged from five to ten years), making it possible that some links are more ‘visible’ than others. A further limitation of the study in this regard is the smaller number of participants that were able to take part in the second interviews (four out of the six original participants). With the second interviews being more

specifically focused on the link between culture and growth, there was a loss of an ability to probe this relationship with two participants.

Nevertheless, it can still be interpreted that art group experience is a process involving movement between the art group culture and personal growth with a range of process factors as mediatory mechanisms. It would be interesting for future research to add to the process diagram that is suggested in this paper, by longitudinally focusing on aspects of change in a way that leads to more sophistication in our understanding of community arts for mental health. Although some papers (e.g. Stickley et al, 2007) acknowledge that their themes are inter-related, no studies attempt to tease out a preliminary picture of what a community arts for mental health 'process' might look like. This paper therefore represents a first attempt at depicting the links between themes, which may be supported or refuted by further exploration and interpretation.

Better understanding of group processes may facilitate a transfer of learning across art projects, which is currently lacking. Data on outcomes and benefits of individual community arts can only go so far in informing aspects of set-up and organisational planning when designing community arts projects for mental health. Understanding the aspects of group processes that are most meaningfully experienced provides something substantive for project design and goes some way to answering calls for "useful – as opposed to accurate" – findings (Newman, 2003; 320). In essence, it takes research a step back, as White (2006) suggests, to understand the processes and mechanisms involved in taking part in community arts for mental health.

#### 4.1.2 Bi-directional relationships

This study found that the process of taking part in a community arts group for mental health was complex, highlighting the need to refrain from simplistic assumptions about the nature of participant experience. At the heart of complexity is that participants benefit most from taking part in the group when there is no perceived expectation from others for them to benefit. In this sense, *freedom from expectation* becomes a necessary prerequisite for *personal growth*. More specifically, however, understanding the ways in which *freedom to do* and *freedom to be* may interact, and impact on one another, is a key point of complexity for future research to explore in more depth. In diagram 3, this interaction is illustrated by the double arrow between the boxes of *freedom to do* and *freedom to be*.

An example of this interaction between facets of experience is that *freedom to be* can allow a participant to feel comfortable enough to engage in the art group in the first place, leading to a management of feelings as they engage in self-directed artwork (*freedom to do*). In other words, the ability to ‘be yourself’ supports the self-direction of artwork since difficult feelings can be expressed and worked on, rather than masked. In the other direction, however, it can be interpreted that *freedom to do* impacts on *freedom to be* since changing feelings through self-directed artwork is also accepted by the group (acceptance of the changeable self).

Overall, the interaction of *freedom to do* and *freedom to be*, and their resulting changes in feelings and perceptions of acceptance, may represent bi-directional relationships of effect that are difficult to disentangle. Although not extrapolated from the data in this study, the relationship between the art group culture and long-term growth may also be bi-directional. For example, an increase in confidence may lead to more of a perceived ability to ‘be yourself’ (enhancing the sense of *freedom to be*) and an enhanced sense of *freedom to be* may lead to the development of confidence. A longitudinal approach to researching the bi-directional relationships

between experiential factors should also therefore look at the impact that the personal growth of participants may have on the art group culture if group cultures are constructed by those in the group. Tracking the development of social norms and values in a community arts group would provide an interesting insight into the relationship between personal growth and the development of group culture. Although it was mainly found that it was the group culture that led to personal growth, it is likely that the model is less linear than has been depicted in this paper. Furthermore, the specific interactions between factors need better investigation by taking a finer lens to particular stages of the overall model that is presented in this paper.

#### **4.2 Freedom from expectation**

This superordinate theme of freedom from expectation is particularly novel in broadening and deepening our understanding of what it means to take part in community arts for mental health. Few studies (with the exception of Van Lith et al; 2011 and Parr, 2006) have shed light on the aspects of group characteristics that are valued by participants, yet this study found that they play a crucial role in creating an environment that is conducive to positive engagement in art and multiple aspects of change. Without the underpinning values and multiple meanings of freedom from expectation that were interpreted to span participant experience, it is hard to envisage how community arts could be open-minded enough to respond to, and cater for, the variable needs of participants that were found in this study. Rather than being an added luxury of participation, *freedom from expectation* was a central meaningful feature of participants' experiences that fundamentally allowed positive change to happen.

It is interesting, therefore, that no other studies appear to have found freedom from expectation to be an overarching theme, although there are hints of similarity between specific facets of freedom from expectation. Van Lith et al (2011; 655) identify perceptions of feeling 'no pressure' at community arts (suggesting a link

with freedom to do) and as a place where “people felt free to be themselves” within an environment based on non-judgement, acceptance, trust and respect (suggesting similarity with freedom to be).

#### **4.2.1 Freedom ‘from’**

Perceptions of being free from the expectations of others in this study went as far as examples of an ‘ultimate freedom;’ that is, feeling no pressure to socially or verbally interact (an example of an ultimate *freedom to be*) or engage in any art activity (an example of an ultimate *freedom to do*). They are interpreted as examples of an ‘ultimate freedom’ given that both social interaction and engaging in art can be seen as the two main, assumed, features of taking part in community arts. Wider literature on the more general concept of freedom in artistic creativity, however, questions whether a sense of *freedom from* is infact an ultimate freedom. Included in this argument is that being completely free to create any form of artwork can invoke a “burden of perceptual choice” (Freeman, 1990; 111). This premise was evident in Keith’s interview when he talked about the “white fright” of having complete self-direction with art. In this sense, complete *freedom to do* can be seen as an expectation in itself. Although Janet made reference to a freedom to ‘do nothing,’ Keith felt a pressure to do ‘something.’ This was also found in Lawthom’s (2007) study where choice and control over art sessions, and a perceived lack of structure, was seen by some as disempowering rather than liberating.

The difference between Keith and Janet can be interpreted as a difference in perception about ‘how far freedom can go’ at the art group. On the other hand, it may be that Keith perceived the same freedom from expectation as Janet but that he expected *himself* to create something. In this sense, it is possible that expectations can originate from the individual rather than art group, particularly when it was found that participants had come to set themselves goals with their art. When considered in context, however, the pressure of having complete self-

direction with art was only mentioned by Keith and was notably the only aspect of pressure that Keith was sometimes interpreted to feel at the art group. *Freedom from* still permeated the meanings of art group experience for all participants.

Whereas Freeman (1990) proposes that people may still be unable to lead meaningful lives even when “wholly free from all of the constraints, controls and prohibitions of society and culture,” this study suggests that it is *freedom from* that proves pivotally meaningful to art group experience. The key point of difference between Freeman’s (1990) argument may, however, be the context of mental health. Freeman (1990) is talking about art and freedom in relation to general artistic creativity, whereas from a mental health perspective it can be proposed that meanings of freedom will take into account the wider context of pressure and constraint that were linked to perceptions of other peoples’ expectations. In this perspective, the meaning of ‘ultimate freedom,’ in this group of participants, may be *freedom from* due to participants’ experiences of pressure, constraint and social exclusion being so prevalent. If these factors were not so frequently experienced in everyday life, *freedom from expectation* at the art group may not be as significant.

Whereas participants saw the potential to act upon an ‘ultimate freedom’ from expectation, by not engaging in art and/or social activity, it was largely apparent that participants actively chose to engage in both facets of experience. In this sense, it was having the potential for ‘ultimate’ freedom, rather than necessarily acting upon it, that was valued. Perhaps discussion of ultimate freedom in interviews was more about conveying the depth of the art group’s freedom than it was reflective of actual participation. In actual participation, the dual experience of having both a sense of *freedom to do* and *freedom to be* meant that there could be flexible and changeable focus on either art or social.

#### **4.2.2 The dual focus of ‘art and social’ rather than mental health**

Participants drew on the facets of freedom to do and freedom to be in a flexible way that conveyed art group experience as fluid in response to it meeting changeable needs. A key example is Sheena’s changeable living arrangements where her need for social interaction is less when she is admitted to hospital. Instead, Sheena describes her use of art as a coping mechanism (*“to keep my brain going”*) and suggests that art activity becomes her primary focus. When living alone, however, Sheena conveys a sense that both art and social become equally important. In this sense, art group experience means an ability to draw on the dual facet of having the opportunity to engage in art and/or social (or neither from an ‘ultimate freedom’ perspective).

Whereas there is a common focus on social engagement in interventions to support those with mental health problems, this study shows that it was the interaction of art *and* social activity that was meaningful. When social interaction was valued, it was about more than a general chance to be with other people; instead, it was about gaining a shared line of communication through having art as a specific topic of conversation. For Geraldine, this meant that social interaction was safer and more comfortable. Van Lith et al (2011; 658) report a similar focus on art within the social interaction in their groups and therefore position the shared activity of art as a “catalyst for connection.” Argyle (2003) also found that art facilitated interaction between group members; however it was related to the single parent group and not the mental health group within their study.

In focusing on ‘art and social,’ there appeared to be a lack of explicit focus on mental health problems at the art group. This was apparent in the observations that were made of the art group and in the artist’s description of there being very little dialogue about mental health problems (see appendix 1). Perhaps in reflection of the art group culture, participants did not speak about the specific nature of their mental health problems in interviews. There were also no views given on the lack of

mental health dialogue at the art group. The meaning of the art group focusing on 'art and social,' rather than mental health problems, is therefore largely interpretable.

The focus on 'art and social' may represent a combination of individual and social factors that constitute a psychosocial, rather than medical, perspective of the ways in which mental health problems can be supported through community arts. The combination of 'art and social' experience can therefore be regarded as a specific point of interest to health psychology and underscores the importance of exploring what community arts 'look like' from the perspectives of those engaged in the process. A crude way to separate the 'psychological' from the 'social' is the difference between processes of freedom to do (leading to the management of feelings and changing of inner states) and freedom to be (leading to group acceptance and a sense of commonality). However, as any psychosocial model represents, psychological and social factors overlap so that freedom to do, freedom to be and their resulting processes are more likely to be psychosocial from the start. This links back to the earlier discussion of the interaction between freedom to do and freedom to be and how, for example, the management of feelings leads from a self-directed art activity but is supported by group acceptance.

The focus on 'art and social' also links to the perspective of positive psychology in the sense that participants place focus on the intervention giving benefit rather than on the problem or area of deficit. This was an explicit finding in Heenan's (2006; 188) study where statutory health services, in comparison with community arts, were seen by participants as focusing on "what was wrong with the person rather than what they were capable of." This evokes questions about whether the guiding philosophy of community-arts, in terms of their focus on art rather than health or illness, is internalised by participants in a way that is incorporated into their meanings of art group experience. This resonates with Larkin et al's (2006) reminder that, from an IPA focus, context is fundamental to meaning-making.



Alternatively, or in addition, the focus on 'art and social' – rather than mental health – may be participant-led in a way that creates the ethos of the art group as a place where mental health problems are not given explicit focus. In this study, the artist perceived that members saw the art group as a 'break from therapy' and she therefore refrained from imposing a dialogue about mental health on the group. Other groups, however, appear to be more artist-led in this regard. Lawthom et al (2007) found that the artists running the groups in their study were strong in their focus on art, rather than mental health, because they felt that consciousness-raising around mental health would undermine the value of art in improving it. The art group members, however, were found to often offer traumatic accounts of experience that left both the artists and participants in situations where emotive issues were not dealt with. The authors therefore suggest that there can be a difficulty in getting the right balance so that needs are still met. In this study, however, there was a match between the artist and participants on the 'art and social' rather than mental health.

The difference between the art group in this particular study and the other groups where mental health issues became an explicit dialogue cannot be fully established without better understanding of the contexts of other groups. However, research to date has focused primarily on personal benefit without giving insight into the ways in which group processes might impact. In this particular study, the art group was surrounded by a general mental health charity where opportunities for a mental health dialogue may be experienced elsewhere. Indeed, participants made contrasts between the general drop-in facility and the art group where social expectations were perceived to be different. This evokes question about the similarities and differences between the cultural ethos of community arts and other contexts. In particular, the premise of whether there is mental health dialogue in other contexts arouses question about the ways in which community arts are similar or different to therapeutic approaches:

#### **4.2.3 Can freedom from expectation be linked with therapeutic contexts?**

There are notable links that can be made between the culture of the art group and therapeutic environments that attempt to create interpersonal dynamics based on an ethos of acceptance, safety, flexibility and encouragement. Furthermore, the creative involvement in art may represent therapies involving play. Overall, the art group was conceptualised as deliberately different to therapy in its set-up, yet participants went on to describe what can be interpreted as therapeutic benefits of attendance (see discussion of personal growth). These factors may indicate a role for the breaking down of disciplinary barriers to explore the integration between arts and health (as suggested by Putland; 2008) and a look at the possibility of overlap between art therapy and community (arts as suggested by Kapitan; 2008).

Like most areas of health and illness, the boundaries between what is deliberately conceptualised as 'therapy' and 'non-therapy' may not be clear cut. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the route to experiencing therapeutic benefit in community arts is relatively specific in relation to the needs of those with mental health problems. The uniqueness of community arts was largely attributed to the art group culture throughout participant accounts of experience. Furthermore, contrasts were made to other mental health interventions, suggesting that participants themselves saw the art group as non-therapeutic. Sheena, for example, made stark contrasts between the art group and her perceptions of psychiatric treatment, which she saw as oppressive in its categorisation of mental health problems. In this sense, it was a lack of *freedom to be* that Sheena perceived as negative in relation to psychiatry. These contrasts suggest that it is not merely the attainment of therapeutic benefits that are meaningful for those with mental health problems; rather, it is the way in which they are attained, otherwise the meaning of *freedom from expectation* would not have been found as an overarching theme.

The importance of the journey of community arts gives a great deal of credence to the exploration of process data. By doing so, this study suggests that it is the

journey of community arts that holds the most meaning for participants. It is the combination of *freedom to do* and *freedom to be* that may be more relevant than whether a group engages in dialogue about mental health or whether it is classed as therapeutic or not. The focus on the 'journey' of community arts for mental health experience, and the specificity of that journey, is the point by which community arts may differ from other approaches and offer insight into the reconceptualisation of what 'recovery' from mental health problems can mean. Although Heenan (2006) found that community arts can break down some of the barriers around discussing mental health issues by offering a non-judgemental context, the findings of this study suggest that addressing mental health problems through community arts is a more implicit process where participants focus on 'art and social' whilst engaged in an accepting culture. Therefore, the lack of dialogue about mental health is reflective of the implicit 'journey' that is valued.

Although the ethos of community arts may be shared by therapeutic approaches, the key point of difference can be interpreted as the perception of *expectation*. This is particularly relevant to the examples of 'ultimate freedom' explicated earlier, where participants may never draw on the ultimate freedom of 'not doing' or 'not talking,' but value is placed on the freedom from the *expectation* to engage in anything at all. In other forms of therapy where there is a focus on 'doing', e.g. art therapy, there may still be perceived expectation, and therefore pressure, *to do*. Similarly, therapeutic approaches, based on verbal expression, may evoke an expectation to *be* in terms of 'being' interactive. Furthermore, a perceived lack of freedom from expectation in other approaches may result from interventions being individually-focused. This study suggests that freedom from expectation was created through a group environment where experiences of group acceptance were particularly powerful in leading to benefits that were housed under the overarching notion of a sense of commonality.

#### **4.2.4 A sense of commonality within the context of social inclusion and exclusion**

A major theme in this study is that all participants perceived a sense of commonality at the art group. This is a point which may set community arts aside from individually-focused interventions for mental health. Although the literature separates community arts from art therapy on their differential focus on the individual and collective (Wilson & Goldie, 2006; White, 2006), this study suggests that it is more specifically about a sense of having something in common with other people and then more multidimensionally about a sense of commonality meaning three things; these are, buffers to social exclusion and stigma, shared lines of communication and empathy with others. The exploration of participant experience from an IPA perspective can therefore be seen as particularly successful at understanding what being part of a collective group actually means in a community art for mental health context.

Van Lith et al (2011) identify a sense of belonging, which would appear similar to a sense of commonality in their description of the group as offering “connectedness” to other people experiencing similar problems. Spandler et al (2007; 796) found a similar theme, although defined as ‘social support’ where a common bond was about having sensitivity to others and the commonality of experiencing mental health problems. This links with Keith’s sense of empathy from being amongst those with mental health problems. The data extract that is provided for social support in Spandler et al’s paper also has clear resemblances to the theme *freedom to be* in terms of group acceptance; participants describe that “you can be yourself...no pressure to fit in,” and “everyone seems to understand what you’re going through.” One of the conclusions of Spandler et al’s paper, therefore, is that there were particular benefits to constructing the group as a mental health group rather than a general arts provision.

Where this study differs, or adds, to other studies that find a sense of commonality is the more multidimensional finding that commonality relates to both artistic

creativity *and* mental health. Although Keith appreciated the commonality of being with others who have mental health problems, a feeling of empathy was related, by Sheena, to 'arty' people. Interestingly, and perhaps refuting common assumption, a sense of commonality within a group for those with mental health problems was about more than mental health. This not a finding suggested by Van Lith et al (2011) or Spandler et al (2007) where a sense of commonality appears to be about being with other people who can empathise with the nature of mental health problems. Through the lens of identity, however, Spandler et al (2007; 796) suggest changes in a sense of self, from someone with a mental health problem to "a new artistic identity." Stickley et al (2007) also interpret identity changes in their study and propose that art may therefore offer a form of social inclusion in terms of a sense of belonging with other creative people.

A sense of commonality from being with creative, or 'arty,' people and its links to social inclusion are interesting. This may be the bridging mechanism that goes beyond mental health contexts to connect community arts participants with wider society. However, the findings of this study suggest that a sense of commonality was about connections *within* the art group rather than beyond. Sheena related a sense of empathy with 'arty' people, but made contrasts between the creative culture of the group and the non-creative culture in life outside of the art group. This is different to social inclusion agendas, which prioritise participation in 'mainstream' contexts (Spandler et al, 2007) and call for a "radical shifting of social attitudes" towards mental health (Hacking et al 2006; 122).

These findings are largely reflective of the research by Parr (2006) who suggests that community arts for mental health projects are complex in the sense that they have not been found to straightforwardly help to re-locate people with mental health problems into mainstream society. Parr interprets fundamental differences between a 'sense of belonging' and social inclusion, proposing that a sense of belonging might instead lead to psychological and social stability through

connections with other people experiencing mental health problems, the ability to connect with themselves, the possibility of being included in social life within equal and non-marginal terms and having the potential to access new categorisations of 'normal.' In this sense, a sense of belonging is seen as housing important "precursors" for development, which are cultivated in the context of community arts.

A sense of commonality as a precursor for development, which is cultivated through context, is strongly resonant with this study. A sense of belonging was created through a culture of group acceptance from a fundamental sense of freedom to be. Although not therefore a form of social inclusion, a sense of commonality was, however, linked with the use of the art group as a 'bridge.' For Geraldine and Kate, the art group offered a safe and comfortable space from which to try 'branching out' so that the art group can offer a potential base for social inclusion if participants use it in this way. More specifically, it can be interpreted that a sense of commonality forms part of the safety, in terms of it engendering a sense of acceptance and overall freedom from expectation. For Geraldine, the link, as Stickley et al (2007) suggest, can be seen as one of creativity since her movement into wider society was about movement into other art groups. Kate, however, did not offer detail of what type of group she had progressed onto and the opportunity to probe this through interview questioning was missed.

The use of the art group as a 'bridge' positions a sense of commonality as a foundation for attempting activities beyond the art group context. This suggests a process of development and links to Hacking et al's (2006) suggestion that bonding capital (forming connections with people seen as similar to ourselves) can constitute "distance travelled" towards bridging capital (forming connections with people seen as dissimilar to ourselves). Heenan (2006) and Argyle (2003) found that community arts acted as a bridge onto a range of activities and Heenan also found a movement into education and employment; however, like was found by Spandler et

al (2007), this study suggests that 'bridging' was more about progressing onto recreational activity in a non-mental health context rather than 'harder end' outcomes.

Exhibitions and fundraising activities outside of the art group, but still linked to the art group, were also seen as bridging mechanisms; again, suggesting that creativity can bridge a gap between mental health and non-mental health contexts since it is likely that those interested in art in wider society would attend art exhibitions. This is a finding that is also identified by Van Lith et al (2011) who suggest that exhibitions can bridge mental health to the outside world by being a 'non-stigmatising' activity that is acceptable in mainstream society. In this sense, the concept of "distance travelled" in terms of engaging with art in non-mental health contexts may be seen as bonding capital (forming connections with people similar to ourselves – i.e. creative people) *and* bridging capital (forming connections with those seen as dissimilar to ourselves – i.e. people without mental health problems.) Spandler et al (2007) suggest that bridging capital is more important than bonding capital in their postulation that "a broadening of the horizons of people's lives beyond the world of mental health services is such an important aspect of the journey towards recovery." However, it could be argued that this overlooks the possibility that bonding capital is a necessary first step (as suggested by Hacking et al, 2006). In this study, it is possible that progress onto other recreational activity is representative of a step towards what are commonly seen as higher-end achievements. Indeed, Keith talked about aspirations in relation to employment and education that appeared to have been cultivated through art group experience. Without a longitudinal approach to investigating possible interaction between bonding and bridging, however, these are only tentative suggestions.

It is evident, however, that the use of the art group as a bridge into social inclusion is not a natural process for some participants. Geraldine and Kate were the only participants to talk about integration into non-mental health contexts and it is

possible that the meaning of art group experience for others was not about social inclusion. Indeed, Spandler et al (2007) cite literature showing how people with mental health problems do not necessarily aspire to be part of a society that has excluded them (Wallcraft, 2001). Furthermore, it is possible that some participants do not conceptualise the art group as a bridging mechanism. As Van Lith et al (2011) have recently concluded, participants have mixed opinions about 'moving on.' Keith conceptualised the art group as a safe space in terms of there being no expectation to move outwards and saw multiple barriers standing in the way of him attempting to move into academia and employment. There were also strong contrasts made by participants between the cultures of other art contexts and the art group, rendering many art contexts out-with a mental health setting as inaccessible. This is interesting in terms of creativity, in itself, being seen as a sense of freedom in terms of instilling individual agency (Spandler et al, 2007), yet, ironically, it was perceived that other art contexts were riddled with constraint rather than freedom. Freeman (1990) suggests that many general art contexts have become elitist and perceptually non-accessible to those who "don't understand the language" (Freeman, 1990; 118).

This study therefore endorses Parr's (2006) view that participation in the arts does not inherently entail inclusive social processes. Nor does a shared interest in creativity give a straightforward link into mainstream society. A sense of commonality may be experienced without it linking to social inclusion and there may be many challenges to the use of community arts as a route to social inclusion. Furthermore, it was found that a sense of commonality at the art group meant that participants could experience *buffers against social exclusion and stigma* rather than using it as a bridge to social inclusion.

The art group as a 'buffer' against social exclusion, rather than a way of tackling either social inclusion or exclusion, is an interesting finding of this study that suggests the need to understand the value of having a 'space' where inclusion and



exclusion are not explicitly related to experience. Instead, the art group as a 'buffer' positions it as an implicit coping strategy for social exclusion and stigma experienced elsewhere. Heenan (2006) also found that community arts could buffer against feelings of social exclusion; however it was improved self-esteem, rather than a sense of commonality, that was seen as key.

Links to the earlier discussion of 'freedom from' are apparent in this context where the art group as a buffer may be seen as more of a 'freedom from' social exclusion than a 'freedom to' be socially included. It could be suggested, however, that social inclusion in life outside of the art group is not a possible choice for participants, whereas using the art group as a buffer against social exclusion is there for them to experience. In this sense, restrictions on 'freedom to' social inclusion may mean that a sense of *freedom from* becomes the facet that is valued. On the other hand, experiences of social exclusion may be so prevailing for participants that having a chance to be buffered against it, whilst at the art group, becomes the facet that is valued the most.

It is also possible, however, that the experience of engaging in community arts may in itself underscore a sense of social exclusion elsewhere. Paradoxically, this may then lead to a greater need for a 'buffer' through art group participation. This may be true in Keith's case where a strong sense of social exclusion was apparent throughout his interview, yet he did not make attempts to use the art group as a bridge in the way that others did. Interesting questions can also be asked about the impact of seeing others move onto other groups (and possible social inclusion) when the individual feels unable to achieve the same. On the one hand, it could be seen as disempowering and perceived a further evidence of an inability to experience social inclusion; on the other hand, it could be empowering in terms of seeing the possibility amongst those who are perceived to have similar challenges. Interestingly, in Keith's discussion of goals, he perceived that his own barriers to developing his art in an academic way have a collective impact on the rest of the

group (*"it puts everyone else down as well"*), which suggests that, inversely, positive experiences of individuals in the group might also have a collective impact on Keith. This is reflective of findings by Van Lith et al (2011) where feelings of inspiration were reported to be gained from seeing others in the group using art skills for personal growth.

Overall, there are many aspects of the art group culture that may serve to underscore the difference between a mental health context and mainstream society. Differences in perception between the art group and non-mental health art groups is just one example of where participants saw culture clashes between the art group and the outside world. Contrasts were even made between the art group and the overall charity. Fundamentally, it is the difference that participants perceive in the *expectations* of others that separates the culture of the art group from mainstream society. The impacts of this need better explored; on the one hand, the unique subculture of the art group could form unrealistic expectations of what life should be like in the outside world. In attending non-mental health art groups, for example, there is likely to be some form of structure and expectation to engage that participants may benefit from getting used to. On the other hand, there are also processes between bonding and bridging capital that are evident within this study. In this sense, participants may need to form *some* sense of commonality with others, and gain a safe space from which to develop, before wider connections can be made to the 'outside world.' Furthermore, participants may need to form bonds with similar 'creative people' out-with a mental health context as a first step to bridging. To do this, a unique subculture where the norms and values are based on 'non-expectation' may have to be created before development can be made.

## 4.3 Personal Growth

### 4.3.1 The meaning of growth: Going beyond benefits and outcomes

In addition to providing insight into 'where' personal growth might fit with the broad experience of taking part in community arts for mental health, findings in relation to personal growth can also be seen to deepen our understanding about the *meaning* of commonly identified outcomes for those with mental health problems. Confidence, in particular, was seen as a multidimensional construct where it can be *gained* (through the recognition of achievements and experiences of praise) and also *used* (bridging to other groups). The ways in which confidence can be gained is generally given less attention than the ways in which it can be *used*. This is reflective, more generally, of the greater focus on individual outcomes than the social contexts that can cultivate change. In terms of *using* confidence, it was only in Heenan's (2006) study that confidence was found to enable other developments. More specifically, it allowed people the ability to address mental health problems and, like the findings of this study, enabled people to 'bridge' onto other activities.

In relation to *gaining* confidence, the findings of this study show that it can be cultivated through internal mechanisms (feelings of achievement) and external mechanisms (through use of the end product to gain experiences of praise). There is more focus on external mechanisms, however, in the extant literature than there is on those that can be seen as external. Again an exception is Heenan (2006) who suggest that the gaining of abilities and skills leads to confidence. This study interpreted abilities and skills as a separate theme to confidence, and instead interpreted that it was specific feelings of achievement that were an internal link to confidence. There is overlap with Heenan's study, however, in their finding that participants regained abilities and skills in a way that enabled them to re-participate in activities that they had once taken for granted. Although this study did not interpret a link with confidence, Geraldine placed significant value in realising a

regaining of abilities in a way that also conceptualised engagement in the art group as ability to bridge between the past and present.

In relation to external mechanisms to gaining confidence, the visibility of art as an end product is significant, thereby making the cultural foundations of *freedom to do* and *freedom to be* inherently crucial in their role of allowing, and facilitating, engagement in the art process. The visibility of art as an end product has been related to community arts for mental health in other studies. Stickley et al (2007) found that the production of artwork as a visible end-product was important to self-satisfaction; however, the process from the visibility of art to self-satisfaction is not explicated, whereas in this study it was about positive reactions from others and the power of 'showing' someone else a finished product (regardless of positive reaction) to enhance a sense of achievement. Van Lith et al (2011) also found that the ability to see ones progress through the 'image ' of art served to underscore a sense of achievement in being able to follow something to its completion. Interestingly, Spandler et al (2007) link this to the concept of identity where 'seeing' their achievements through the visibility of art was said to let participants see *themselves* in positive terms and allow them to change the way that they perceived others to see them. It is possible that the personal and social facets of identity could offer an interesting interpretation of what achievement means within the wider life context.

The themes of gaining skills and abilities, purpose and productivity and the emergence of goals are particularly enlightening in terms of the contribution that community arts can make to the lives of those affected by mental health problems. The contrasts that participants made to life outside of the art group were stark, suggesting that the art group was their only 'lifeline' in terms of perceiving any purpose in life and seeing a way forward with their problems. In Geraldine's reflection on a time before she had goals with art, she powerfully describes that she

“had nothing, absolutely nothing.” Van Lith et al (2011; 655) report similar findings where art gave people a fundamental purpose to “get out of bed.”

The conceptualisation of mental health recovery as involving ‘hope’ seems particularly relevant to these findings and has already been linked to all three themes of growth by Spandler et al (2007) and generally to change through art by Stickley et al (2007) and Heenan (2006). There is a lack of explanation of what authors mean by ‘hope;’ however, it has been defined by Landeen & Seeman (2000) as “the anticipation of a future based upon mutuality, a sense of personal competence, coping ability, psychological wellbeing, purpose and meaning in life, as well as a sense of ‘the possible’.” (Spandler et al, 2007; 792) With the link between the recognition of achievement and the gaining of confidence that was found in this study, a “sense of personal competence” would also seem to tie in confidence. It is likely, therefore, that hope as an overarching construct that may tie together the growth themes of this study.

The differences between Spandler et al’s (2007) findings and those of this study are in relation to links between growth themes and the further insight that this study provides into ‘where’ growth themes, like confidence, come from. In relation to links between themes, Spandler et al found that it was a sense of ‘purpose and meaning’ that led participants to bridge onto other activities; whereas it was increased confidence (in this study) that was related, by participants, to the ability to bridge. Furthermore, it was the art group as a safe space (cultivated through art group culture) that fundamentally allowed the development of confidence to happen. Whereas the construct of hope is particularly interesting in terms of representing the totality of growth, it does not appear to providing insight into the ways in which community arts allow, and facilitate growth in the first place. Again, the research is a reminder that it is data on process that holds explanatory power.

#### **4.3.2 “You can come to art feeling one way and go away feeling totally different:”**

##### **Where do session changes fit within the context of personal growth?**

The themes of personal growth that were found in this study are the types of ‘wellbeing outcomes’ that Hacking et al (2006) suggest can be “distance travelled” towards higher end health and social outcomes. However, without longitudinal tracking of participants over time, it is difficult to ascertain whether they may lead onto other developments. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that the concept of “distance travelled” also needs to take into account the process-based factors of changes during sessions and group dynamics. In this sense, there may be a need to go a step back in the conceptualisation of what constitutes “distance travelled” to better understand the context of personal growth. This is reflective of the need to understand processes, and not just benefits and outcomes, in community arts more generally.

In relation to the changes that were experienced during the process of an art group session, it is evident that the ability to be ‘in the moment’ was valued in terms of participants being able to express, and respond to, whatever feelings were present at the time of the art group. The spontaneity of art as having therapeutic benefit has been mentioned elsewhere (Argyle, 2003) but a link with the changeability of mental health has not been discussed. A link between expression of art and escapism (in terms of expression leading to escapism) does also not appear to have been found in other studies, even although some general findings on escapism are cited.

With resonance to the finding that escapism represents a sense of ‘moving forward’ at the art group through difficult feelings, Stickley et al (2007) conclude that escapism represents metaphorical movement to ‘other places.’ However, whereas this study provided insight into how escapism made participants feel (relaxation and ‘lifted spirits), Stickley et al suggest a general sense of mystery and adventure.

Furthermore, this study provides insight into escapism within the wider life contexts of participants by interpreting a contrast with feelings of boredom and worry in life outside of the art group. In this sense, escapism offers a form of distraction as well as metaphorical movement.

Although not linked explicitly with escapism, Spandler et al (2007) and Van Lith et al (2011) also suggest findings in relation to the use of art as a distraction; by focusing on something “outside of themselves” that was specific and absorbing, it is suggested that participants were able to deal with distress (Spandler et al, 2007; 794) and have a ‘break’ from the chronicity of mental health problems (Van Lith et al, 2011). Spandler et al then conclude that there is a difference between using art as a distraction to focus *away* from life as opposed to its use in a rebuilding capacity; however, the findings of this study would suggest that this distinction is overly simplistic given that the overall management of feelings (including the use of art as escapism) can lead to positive feelings that represent mediators of long-term growth. In this sense, escapism can be seen as part of re-building life, as opposed to distraction from it in its capacity to change feelings.

Furthermore, this study shows how responding to feelings through the use of experimentation with art activity allowed participants to ‘settle’ in a way that was more about concentration on the task than escapism or distraction. Although this was a process that was found in the study and not linked with any particular outcome beyond an improved concentration, Van Lith et al (2011; 656) suggest that experimentation was found to form a wider basis for trying “new things in life.” Through the challenges and rewards of art-making, the authors suggest that it can create a will to ‘keep trying’ and developing.

Self-expression has also been interpreted as an ability to cope better with mental health problems (Spandler et al, 2007), which would appear similar to the concept of being able to better manage feelings that was interpreted in this study. It has

also been linked to learning about the self and being able to provide an outlet for expression at times of particular difficulty (Stickley et al, 2007; Van Lith et al, 2011). Learning about the self, although not a prevalent theme, was also evident in this study when Geraldine reflected on her engagement in fundraising work for the art group, which had resulted in a feeling that she had ‘pushed herself too far.’ Also with resonance to Stickley et al and Van Lith et al’s (2011) findings, art was also seen as an outlet for difficult feelings ‘as they arose;’ however, in this study a perceived barrier to a spontaneous need for art was the non-permanent art group set-up. Whereas Spandler et al (2007) and Argyle (2003) report that their participants had ‘bridged’ in terms of engaging in art in the home, the findings of this study suggest that art was only engaged in at the time of the art group or through progress onto other groups. On reflection, this is interesting in terms of further underscoring that it is the particular engagement in the art *group*, rather than art *per se*, that is meaningful to participants.

Spandler et al (2007) also suggest that self-expression through art makes participants’ difficulties more visible to others. Similarly, Van Lith et al (2011) found that ‘the image’ of artwork could communicate both with the self (through self-reflection) and with others at the group. These findings are interesting given the lack of explicit verbal focus on mental health problems within the group. Whether art, rather than verbal expression of difficulties, becomes a communication tool is a point that should be explored in future research and it is possible, therefore, that art can be used as a research-based communication tool in the interpretation of meaning (Leavy, 2009; Camic, 2008; Murray & Gray, 2008).

At the same time as session changes in feeling, the social experience of having a sense of commonality with others can be seen as both a mediator of personal growth and an outcome of the group acceptance experienced at the art group. Their role as a mediator resonates with Parr’s (2006) suggestion that social dimensions of experience, like a sense of commonality, can be seen as “precursors”



for development that are cultivated through context. Furthermore, a sense of commonality may itself be an aspect of collective growth that develops over time. Overall, the multi-dimensional ways in which the social factors of the art group can be interpreted suggest a more complex, process-based, role for social dimensions of experience than the wider literature assumes. Whereas the common assumption is that social factors are about 'hard-end' outcomes in relation to social exclusion and inclusion, this study suggests a role in relation to foundations for, and aspects of, personal growth. Overall, although Argyle (2003) proposes that a truly therapeutic experience is one that outlasts immediate and transient change, the findings of this study suggest that processes and changes during sessions are a centrally meaningful aspect of participant experience. Again, it is the particular challenge of mental health problems, and the conceptualisation of the art group as the only outlet for difficult feelings, that seems pivotal to this point. Whether session changes can therefore be interpreted as experiences of personal growth, rather than mediators of the process, is a point for further consideration.

#### **4.3.3 Is there a relationship between personal growth and therapeutic benefit?**

It is clear that self-directed art activity meant that participants focused primarily on enjoying the process of taking part in art, rather than participating in art for any health benefit. Instead, therapeutic benefits would appear to be inadvertent and are identified by participants themselves, retrospectively, rather than operationalised through a purposeful focus on goals from the start. This theory is supported by the findings that convey initial attendance at the art group as exploratory and driven by curiosity rather than to seek out opportunities for attainment of goals. Over time, however, participants had started to realise that there were particular aspects of art that they wanted to focus on, and an element of individual goal-setting became evident.

These findings suggest a pivotal role for community arts in providing opportunity for activity that is seen as just that and not as a vehicle for mental health. Although

other studies have related community arts to therapeutic experience even in the absence of therapeutic focus (Argyle, 2003), the exploration of meaning in this study provides more depth to this premise by suggesting that therapeutic benefits are most meaningful when gained through self-directed activity that is supported through group acceptance. This is particularly apparent in findings about encouragement from the artist, which was interpreted as most meaningful if it was drawn on by participants in a self-directed way. In the wider context of the study, it is suggested that encouragement that is artist-led may be seen as crossing the boundary into perceived expectation and therefore a pressure to engage in the art group in particular ways.

Van Lith et al (2011) present similar findings in relation to encouragement from the artist as a facilitator in providing support, yet freedom and flexibility. A link can be made here to empowerment and ownership of the management of mental health can be made. In this study, empowerment appears to come from within the individual but the cultural surroundings have to be optimal for it to either grow or be conceived in the first place. Rather than explicit encouragement to move forward, it may be that the positivity associated with the art group culture fosters an overarching sense of 'hope' as was found by Stickley et al (2007) and Spandler et al (2007). As already discussed, hope is related in this study to the development of goals, realisation of abilities and skills, and purpose in life.

The effects of community arts on concepts of hope and empowerment need to be further explored, particularly in relation to the stage of empowerment that community arts tap into; that is, do community arts engender an initial feeling of empowerment and hope (help to conceive it) or do they tap into a sense of empowerment and hope already present? Related to this is question about the types of people that may attend a community arts group in the first place and whether they may already have a sense of empowerment in their ability to initiate

attendance. A similar focus to Reynolds & Lim (2007) on exploring the meaning of taking up art as a motive is a point for future research.

## **4.4 Conclusions**

### **4.4.1 Key conclusions and implications for health psychology**

This study suggests a complex process of change and development for those with mental health problems who participate in community arts. In relation to both aims of this study (to explore the meaning of art group experience and the process and ethos of community arts) the overarching conclusion is that the experience of engaging in community arts for mental health is about flexible and progressive interplay between art group culture and individual benefit. More specifically, a group culture that is free from the expectations of others – and the various facets of this theme that were found – is pivotal in creating a meaningful space in which participants can come to experience various dimensions of personal growth. The ability to manage feelings through self-directed approaches is key to empowering change, which, when combined with an overall sense of group acceptance and sense of commonality, can lead to long-term benefit.

In the context of previous research, the findings of this study provide important process data on *how* previously identified benefits to mental health come to be achieved within a community arts context. Furthermore, they suggest that individual ‘take home’ benefits to wellbeing are only partly representative of the meaning of engaging in community arts for mental health; the ‘in the moment’ experience of being part of a culture that is free from the expectations of others, and changes in feelings during sessions, is hugely significant to understanding what engaging in community arts means to those with mental health problems. Taking part in community arts for mental health, however, is not without challenge and participants reflected on the difficulties of working through negative feelings and facing barriers to progress. Even the unique subculture of the art group, although

centrally meaningful, can also be challenging in providing a sense of freedom that may be overwhelming for some.

In addition to allowing an overview of what 'process' might look like in relation to art group participation, the insightful perceptions from those who engage in community arts for mental health also contribute significantly to our understanding of what community arts 'look like,' regardless of how they might be conceptualised from public health perspectives and the different organisations involved in their implementation. In this regard, the second aim of the study – to understand more about community arts approaches – was largely supported by the data. An in-depth picture of what community arts mean to those who engage in them can be related to other common conceptualisations and assumptions of their purpose; in particular, the meaning of community arts in relation to social inclusion and exclusion appears to be far more complex than a simple notion of a role in integrating those with mental health problems into mainstream society.

For some, integration into society seems possible through community arts engendering a base of safety (through fostering a sense of commonality) from which to make connections with non-mental health contexts. In this sense, a mutual interest of creativity may open up social inclusion possibilities through bonding capital out-with the art group. Whether this then leads to bridging capital (in terms of forming connections with people seen as dissimilar to ourselves) is not clear. For others, however, using the art group as a bridge – even bonding with other 'creative people' – is constrained by multiple barriers that include a perception of mainstream creative settings as ill-fitting to the nature of mental health problems. And then there are others for whom a desire for social inclusion does not appear to be part of the meaning of taking part in community arts. Instead, community arts can be enjoyed as a process that offers opportunity for bonding *within* the group through experiences of empathy and having a shared interest with others that can facilitate social interaction. It can also be used as a buffer against social exclusion

that is experienced in mainstream society by allowing a sense of commonality with others that is inherently different to the concept of social inclusion.

The multiple ways in which community arts experience may, or may not, relate to public health goals for mental health is a point of exploration that health psychologists could play a significant role in. There may be more general learning points for mental health agendas from the exploration of community arts; for example, the findings of this study suggest a need for the concept of mental health 'recovery' to include a focus on how the ethos and culture of groups for those with mental health problems can relate to individual experience. The art group as a unique sub-culture in this study evokes a range of questions for future research in this regard; in particular, whether community arts underscore a sense of 'difference' or instead enable social inclusion through a process of gaining a sense of commonality as a first step. With community arts largely represented as a multidimensional experience, the findings of this study suggest that they may concurrently do both for some participants.

Overall, freedom from expectation means that community arts can be used flexibly in response to the various ways in which participants want, and need, to use them. This relates not only to social inclusion and exclusion, but to the changeability of mental health needs and the differential focus on art or social activity depending on moods and circumstances. The fluid and participant-led engagement in the art group can be seen as key to the match between community arts approaches and mental health needs; a match that is not perceived, by participants, to exist within mainstream art activity. The participants in this study value the multi-dimensional and user-led nature of their experiences so that community arts are not making assumptions about what members 'need,' particularly in the context of public health agenda where it can be interpreted that social inclusion is the main route to mental health improvement.

The multiple ways in which participants were able to use the art group resonates with the point made in chapter 1 of this study about art having the potential to be linked to health in terms of both end product and its process. In terms of product, some participants reflected on valued experiences of praise and there was a notable bridging mechanism between the art group and the 'outside world' by exhibiting the products of artwork. In terms of process, engaging in art activity worked in multiple ways to evoke change and benefit. These multiple mechanisms between art and health are of significant interest to health psychology given its focus on the interplay between psychological and social factors, as well as a positive psychology focus in understanding and improving health. Supporting community arts to understand, and design, their approaches based on the facets of freedom from expectation may be a pivotal and exciting role for health psychology in helping and supporting those with mental health problems. Within this scope, health psychology may be able to support community arts in the cautious and complex role of encouraging and supporting engagement whilst concurrently avoiding any pressure or expectation to engage in certain ways or 'move forward' in terms of personal growth.

The transferability of the findings in relation to freedom from expectation as a base for positive change in mental health is, on a broader level, more questionable. The complexity of freedom from expectation as being key to personal growth is not only challenging for community arts to uphold, but may be even more challenging to engender through other means; in essence, it is unclear whether other interventions for mental health would be able to include the meaningful overlap between freedom to do, freedom to be, focused activity and social interaction. Perhaps a fundamental question for future research, therefore, is on the concept of freedom from expectation itself, in order to more fundamentally understand why the expectations of others can be so troublesome for those with mental health problems. Better understanding of this premise may lead to an enhanced learning about the alternative ways in which other contexts (without the ability to engender

freedom from expectation in the same way) can respond to the finding. In addition to attempting to create other 'pressure-free' environments in terms of expectations, there may be a role for working through the negativity that those with mental health problems may associate with the perceived expectations placed on them by other people.

Consideration of the transferability of learning between community arts and other approaches to mental health also prompts discussion about whether community arts may be able to 'talk to' therapeutic approaches in enhancing art experiences for those with mental health problems. Previous theorists have made distinctions between art therapy and community arts that may be too crude in their assumptions of an 'individual versus collective' focus between the fields. Rather than distinct, this study suggests a sophisticated interplay between individual and collective experience in community arts that spans the realms of therapeutic benefit. The difference looks more likely to be that community arts, in their set-up as a group activity, are able to engender an ethos (in this case, freedom from expectation) through the culture of a group rather than through an individual therapist. Whether art therapy approaches aim to create a similar ethos is an interesting point for dialogue between the fields. Furthermore, interesting discussion could be had about whether art therapy approaches have more explicit aims for participants than was found in the community arts approach in this study. Rather than being an explicit goal, therapeutic benefit appeared to be inadvertently experienced by participants as they engaged in the process of community arts and, interestingly, members started to set personal goals for themselves as they progressed through their participative journey. Health psychologists may have a central collaborative role with artists and various interested parties in bringing together art therapy and community arts to look at points of intersect and overlap that may further enhance art approaches for those with mental health problems. There is a role for health psychology research to examine the similarities and differences of community arts to therapeutic approaches with the possibility of the

'journey' of personal growth being more important than categorisation of community arts as therapeutic or not.

It is reflexively acknowledged that the researcher in this study is neither a therapist, an artist nor an expert in mental health and had limited understanding of all three areas when undertaking this research. Although this can be an advantage in terms of offering interpretations that are not interwoven with prior knowledge on the subject area, it is also a disadvantage in terms of not being able to make links with therapeutic areas and other aspects of art experience that may offer important connections to the findings. This reflection, however, highlights the need for what Putland (2008) calls a "community of interest" in order to better collaboratively understand the links between arts and health from various disciplinary perspectives. In this sense, health psychology can play a central – but not isolated – role in advancing understanding and practice in relation to community arts.

#### **4.4.2 Critical evaluation of the study and related suggestions for future research**

A longitudinal research approach to the study of community arts for mental health may enlighten many of the findings and concepts of this study. This study was limited in its ability to shed light on the ways in which the general and specific processes involved in community art engagement may interact within the trajectory of growth that was identified. In particular, the finding that culture and growth are the most meaningful aspects of experience suggests a need to better understand how group norms and values develop over time, and how they might be bi-directionally related to changes in participants. The interaction between bonding and bridging capital and growth themes would also benefit from a longitudinal focus in determining whether they are representative of "distance travelled" towards higher end health and social outcomes. Although participants were able to reflect on their growth over a lengthy period of time (5-10 years of art group experience), their progress was described as "slow" so that further stages of the participant journey remain to be explored. At the other end of the journey, the lack



of focus on 'life before community arts' is a limitation of this study. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach may enhance understanding about how changes in the way that participants feel at sessions may grow over time. The ability to manage feelings through self-expression, for example, may be a facet that takes time to develop.

Participant observation and art-related approaches to exploring meaning through artwork are interesting methodologies to explore for future research, particularly for those who could not be part of the study because of communication difficulties. As Camic (2008) suggests, arts as a communication resource can be seen as a method of data collection and using visual arts as a source of data or representation is said to be particularly powerful at bringing attention to interpretative phases of research by making the analysis explicitly focused on meaning-making. There may be epistemological difficulties, however, in the translation of art into meaning, particularly when the research question is broader than the question of that which is being expressed through artwork. What community arts mean to participants in terms of engagement in the group, as well as the art, arguably requires a broader narrative. That said, only including those who can articulate their experiences seems ironic in contexts where an aim is to buffer against exclusion and marginalisation. This was a limitation of the context exploration stage of the research where it was not wholly apparent that verbalising experience would be extremely difficult for some.

Despite the limitations of only focusing on verbal data, the general use of IPA as an approach to exploring the meaning of community arts is reflected upon as extremely successful in being able to interpret the convergences and divergences amongst participants, particularly in the context of mental health where variation was so prevalent. Whilst generating a collective framework of experience, it was felt that IPA allowed multiple meanings to be represented in way that remained true to the complexity and totality of individual experience.

Furthermore, IPA's focus on meaning can be seen as key to allowing the interpretation of process data in a way that remains true to the context of the research. The concept of process in community arts for mental health evidently spans multiple aspects of meaning including personal change and development, cultural facets of experience, 'recovery' from mental health problems and, of course, the act of art-making itself. Going a step back to understand what community arts means to participants, and not just what they gain from the experience, illuminates multiple aspects of process that can offer more sophisticated understandings about mental health problems, refraining from falling into the stagnancy of common assumption about what people with mental health problems need or want.

The context exploration stage of the study was also extremely important in achieving an informed methodological design that was sensitive to the needs of participants. This cannot be underestimated in terms of gaining the trust and respect of participants, thus ensuring ethical standards were upheld, participation enabled and quality data generated. The gradual and time-consuming interpersonal approach that was made before data collection was a significant learning experience that may be useful for other studies in mental health contexts to consider. The impact of this preliminary stage of the research on the interpretations made throughout the study should, however, be acknowledged. Although a new area of interest for the researcher, formal data collection came after insights gained about the artists' aims and art group observation. However, this is not problematic from an IPA perspective in terms of prior conceptions always being seen as inseparable from the interpretative process.

In considering the limitations of this study, it is acknowledged that the findings and processes identified are only representative of one particular group. Understanding more about the processes involved in other community arts for mental health projects can allow researchers to look comparatively across studies and illuminate

potential similarities of the ways in which group factors can be linked to individual benefit. Although groups will inevitably vary in their purpose, set-up and membership, this quest would likely result in further data about the most meaningful mechanisms of change (e.g. a sense of commonality) that could potentially provide a link amongst the diversity. Furthermore, interesting overlaps between community arts in other health contexts would also be interesting to explore, particularly in terms of whether other areas of health place the same value on the ethos of freedom from expectation and whether a similar, or different, process of personal growth can be identified. However, since research on community arts for mental health is a particular area of deficit, and given the long established link between art and mental health, it can be suggested that a detailed examination of this particular context is an imperative first step.

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## **Appendix 1: Exploring the research context**

### **Methods used to explore the research context**

#### ***Meeting the artist and charity manager***

An in-depth face-to-face meeting with the artist was tape recorded. Key themes, and their potential impacts on the research approach, were then extrapolated from the discussion. The set of questions used to shape this discussion ranged from questions about the aims of the art group to questions about the structure and content of the sessions.

#### ***Introductory observation***

Discussion with the artist during the above stage of context exploration revealed that members could often be nervous with unfamiliar people coming into the art group; this was related to the nature of mental health problems. In result, I decided to introduce myself and spend time in an art group session before inviting members to take part in the research. This allowed me to take a gradual approach to building some rapport with members and explaining the aims of the research when it appeared suitable to do so. During this familiarisation time, I was able to gain some useful insight into the workings of the art group and the nature of taking part.

### **Findings: Context information**

The information obtained through the context-exploration stage can be most insightfully discussed around four main identified themes. The impacts of these findings on the research methodology and design are interwoven into chapter 2 so that, rather than a stand-alone section, they can be discussed in relation to other aspects of methodological decision-making.

#### ***Art group philosophy***

Discussion with the artist firstly revealed that the art group was run on the basis of being user-led and informal. It was purposely not conceptualised or designed as art therapy and instead was provided within a 'community arts for mental health' context. In this sense, members were free to participate and benefit from the art in any way they perceive to be of individual value and there were no pre-defined expectations or therapeutic components that are identified by the artist. The artist also reported that there were no explicit aims and goals that could be pre-determined by the programme. Instead, she explained her willingness to maintain an open approach, with emphasis placed on providing visual art-making opportunities that members could tailor to their own preferences. A range of art-making material was on offer, including various forms of paint and equipment for print-making and sculpture.

After some initial time spent in the art group, I identified that the artist's desire to be goal-free, flexible, and user-led, could be seen as 'goals' in themselves. In this sense, the artist's interpersonal approach and flexible structure, when observed, could be seen as a relatively deliberate approach, rather than something that 'just happens.' After discussion, the artist agreed and her approach was re-conceptualised as a set of implicit aims. These aims were extrapolated from discussion notes, written up together during the meeting and then reviewed and refined several times. This stage of the research was essentially for the purpose of the smaller research evaluation; however, the establishment of implicit aims was pertinent to my understanding of the key elements of the artist's approach and the overall philosophy of running the art group.

Although the artist did not communicate any objectives with members, her implicit aims were found to centre around six main points:

1. To provide opportunities for members to participate in different forms of visual artwork by teaching and demonstrating a range of techniques with a variety of materials.
2. To provide guidance, direction and feedback with artwork at each session, whilst encouraging the development of individual interests and self-directed activity.
3. To establish an understanding of individual participation in order to create a user-led and responsive approach to the explicit and implicit intentions of members at each session. This includes developing an initial understanding of a member's level of interest in art activity, as well as an on-going appraisal of individual desires and agendas.
4. To maintain a flexible and open approach at each session, allowing opportunity for members to participate and benefit from the group in individualised ways.
5. To create a friendly and non-judgmental environment whereby members feel comfortable to engage in art activity and self-directed participation at each session.
6. To allow members a safe space to address any personal issues that they may consider relevant to their participation in the art group.

### ***The wider charity context***

Also discussed was that the art group operated within the context of the wider charity and user-led network; therefore, the charity's aims were also seen as part of the overall philosophy of the art group.

The art group ran within a registered charity and user-led network providing opportunities for adults with mental health needs in the community. Originally set up to provide facilities beyond the confines of conventional mental health services, the charity is considered a major service provider within its own right. At the heart of this service is the overall philosophy of user-led activity and shared support for people with mental health issues. At the time of writing, the art group runs in three out of five of the drop-in facilities within a semi-rural context. Aims of the charity were found in the charity website and are as follows:

1. Easing the struggle of social isolation – fundamental belief in the right to live without harassment and discrimination in the community.
2. The provision of a safe and non-judgemental environment, allowing individuals to gain confidence, self-esteem and re-establish trust in people.
3. Raising self-esteem and empowering individuals through enabling self-help and promoting a positive view of mental health.
4. The perception of self-help as part of the 'healing' process; empowering members both collectively and individually.

#### ***User-led activity and communication***

The artist explained that membership of the art group was largely dependent on mental health factors such as mood, motivation, concentration spans and other associated issues such as hospitalisation and healthcare appointment times. In result, the group was run on the basis that members could 'come and go' as they pleased with no expectation placed on them to stay for any fixed length of time. It was apparent that the artist linked this structure with the focus on user-led activity, which she contrasted with elements of therapy for mental health problems.

The user-led approach to the art group was apparent right from the start of my observations of the group. Activity was dictated largely by individual interests from the start of the session. Choice of art activity seemed to relate strongly to mood in the sense that most members deliberated over what kind of art materials that they "felt like using." On the occasions that I spent time in the group, there were various levels of participation at any one time. For example, on one occasion, one member decided to only observe; another made sporadic attempts at various activities; another member spent the session concentrating on one drawing; and others produced various forms of artwork throughout the session, fleeting quickly between activities.

The artist also explained how communication in the group was based on a user-led philosophy. This was due, in part, to the artist's experience of some members not responding well to any direct questions and other general problems with

communication. The artist reflected that some members had indicated that they had learning disabilities. This was seen as an added factor in the artist's approach of allowing members to initiate conversation if they felt comfortable to do so. In result, the artist explained her desistance from discussion of personal circumstances and mental health problems, unless initiated by the members themselves. My time spent in the art group, although minimal, illustrated this approach. It was noted, for example, that introductory talk by the artist was something along the lines of, "what do you feel like doing today?" as opposed to "how do you feel today?"

It was mentioned by the artist that discussion within the group was usually based around the art itself and members had expressed their satisfaction at being able to take part in art activity without any pre-conceived expectation of them to talk about personal issues. This was reflected in my observations of the group; on the occasion that I visited, there was very little conversation about anything other than the art tasks at hand. Again, the artist contrasted this approach with therapy and saw the user-led nature of communication as a refreshing contrast to therapeutic approaches. In particular, it appeared to the artist that the art group was seen as a 'break' from therapy and she was keen that the research approach should respect this.

### ***Art group members***

Members were evidently nervous and wary about an unfamiliar person within the art group context. I was consequently very aware of the impact of my presence and maintained an unobtrusive and friendly approach in a bid to make the group more comfortable. This follows Yardley's (2008) recommendation to be sensitive to the perspectives and socio-cultural context of participants and the data collection setting, and to maintain an awareness of how the interviewer's characteristics may have an effect on the data collected. Yardley gives the example of participants potentially perceiving the interviewer as linked with "those in authority," and this was seen as particularly relevant given that participants were likely to be receiving therapy and may have made an association between my psychology background and treatment for mental health problems.

I was aware of small ways of attempting to counteract perceptions of authority; for example, I dressed very casually and did not bring in any research equipment on the first visit. Similarly, attention to an unthreatening interpersonal approach appeared to be key to facilitating my acceptance into the group. Communication on entering the art groups was minimal and I respected the members' non-verbal signals (e.g. minimal eye contact) that appeared to indicate a more closed interpersonal stance. As time went on, however, the members appeared more comfortable with my presence and communication gradually opened up. A useful approach was to talk to members about their art work and the artist was particularly helpful in bringing me into such discussion.

## Appendix 2: Quality guidelines

Although there is a widespread acceptance of the need for ‘quality’ qualitative research, there appears to be an increasing consensus that using criteria checklists in a prescriptive way does not guarantee rigour or necessarily capture the imaginative and creative capacity that allows new meanings to emerge (e.g. Barbour 2001, Yardley 2008). Dixon-Woods et al (2007) found that although structured approaches to quality appraisal identified papers that complied with procedural standards, they were less insightful and make weaker conceptual developments than papers identified through subjective expert judgement. These findings support their earlier argument that “some of the most important qualities of qualitative research are hard to measure” (Dixon-woods et al, 2004: 224).

Such discussion includes a stance against what Barbour (2001) defines as a “one size fits all” approach to simple “technical fixes,” or “criteriology” as explicated in Dixon-Woods et al (2004; 223). Instead, there is an acceptance that different methodologies evoke different definitions of quality, as is the case with specific guidelines for various study designs in quantitative research (Elliot et al, 1999; Reicher, 2000; Dixon-Woods et al, 2004, 2007; Madill et al, 2000). This is reflective of the premise that what constitutes ‘quality’ in qualitative research is part of the larger ontological debate about the nature of knowledge (Mays & Pope, 2000). Furthermore, it forms part of the argument for health psychology to refrain from becoming overly preoccupied with “method over meaning.” This stance against ‘methodolatry’ is discussed at many levels (e.g. Reicher, 2000, Elliot et al), but summarized here as a call for qualitative research to be valued in terms of the quality of its interpretations and understandings, rather than answering to quantitative-based values in attempt to be respected within its medical context (Chamberlain, 2000).

As Dixon-Wood et al (2007) suggest, there is consequently no easy solution to assessing quality; however, it is generally accepted that published guidelines can provide a useful “toolbox” from which procedures for enhancing qualitative rigour can be flexibly selected and applied to various methodologies (Yardley, 2008). This means that although there is a warning against a uniform and simple ‘tick-box’ approach, the ability of a study to show how it meets relevant guidelines (in its own way) can support claims of its validity, trustworthiness and usefulness. In result, there is a call for researchers to embed guidelines thoughtfully and creatively, with an understanding of the rationale and assumptions behind their approach (Barbour, 2001, Elliot et al 1999, Yardley 2008).

After deliberation between different guidelines, Yardley’s (2008) guidelines were considered most appropriate in the sense that, a) they are linked to IPA in that they form a chapter of Smith’s most recent texts: Smith (2008, 2011), b) they usefully amalgamate various guidelines that have gone before, and c) they are thought to

confer closely with those of Elliot et al (1999) whose aim of qualitative research is thought to fit most appropriately with 'grounded' approaches like IPA, rather than discursive psychologies (Reicher, 2000). In accordance, Elliot et al's (1999) guidelines have been previously linked to IPA methodology by other authors; for example, Reid et al (2005) Newton et al (2007) and Hefferon & Rodriguez (2011.) Smith (2011) also provides a very useful insight into how IPA papers can be judged specifically for quality. In addition to points on a strong interpretation of the data, appropriate use of data extracts and trying to make the report engaging to the reader, his point on paying attention to convergence and divergence in the data was especially useful for this thesis given its investigation of both individual and group experience:

*"There should be a skilful demonstration of both patterns of similarity among participants as well as the uniqueness of the individual experience. The unfolding narrative for a theme thus provides a careful interpretative analysis of how participants manifest the same theme in particular and different ways. This nuanced capturing of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence is the hallmark of good IPA work" (Smith, 2011; 24).*



## **Appendix 3: Reflections on interviews and ethical considerations**

### **Participant recruitment and obtaining informed consent**

#### ***First interviews:***

User-led attendance at the art group, although imperative to the flexibility of the artist's approach, was identified as potentially problematic for participant recruitment and planning in terms of data collection timing. In essence, it was identified that the nature of the group was such that planning and pre-defining times when members would feel like taking part in research would be virtually impossible. Instead, it was agreed that the only potentially effective method of recruitment was for me to attend the art group on numerous occasions, thereby maximising opportunity for members to indicate a time that was most suitable to them. In this sense, the approach to researching the group had to reflect the nature of user-led attendance and the approach of the artist.

Key to this stage of the research was the interpersonal approach that was taken. I had to maintain the sensitive and cautious interpersonal approach that I had found to work in the context-exploration stage of the study (see appendix 1). It was agreed that the artist would introduce me into the group, and that a gradual process of becoming accepted into the group, before inviting members to take part in the research, would be the most suitable and non-threatening approach to data collection. Essentially, it was agreed that the approach would also have to be responsive to 'what was happening on the day' by gauging whether members felt comfortable with the invitation to take part. At this stage of the research, the response of members to the research was largely unpredictable.

This cautious and unobtrusive interpersonal approach facilitated natural discussion and interaction between myself and the participants, namely about the art work. This made the process of inviting people to take part in an interview natural and comfortable. Interestingly, Smith and Dunworth (2003) suggest similar approaches to interviews with children: Dunworth found that becoming acquainted with children and playing games with them significantly increasing their willingness to engage in subsequent interviews (Smith, 2004).

For the first interviews, members of the art group were provided with an information sheet three weeks prior to being invited to take part in the project. The information explained the purpose and nature of the research and was distributed by the artist near the beginning of the block when she felt it appropriate to do so. Both the artist and I were conscious of the timing of information given: it was important to give the members time to consider their participation and talk over it with others; however, it was equally important not to deter any members from taking part in future art sessions by asking them to participate in research before

they had settled into the art group. I therefore made a one-day visit to each of the three art groups towards the end of the blocks of sessions.

Before inviting members for interview, I was satisfied, through discussion, that members understood the purpose of the research and that informed consent was obtained. I was also satisfied that members felt able to individually decide whether they wanted to take part in the research, although the voluntary aspect was reiterated at the time of interview. I was slightly surprised that members were all so willing to take part, but my understanding of this was perhaps heightened by comments from members about wanting to help the progression and future of the charity's planning. It was evident at this early stage that members were passionate about the group and saw the interview as a way of expressing this. The potential downside is that members may have given answers that were favourable in a bid to maintain the running of the art group. This awareness of possible participant agendas is consistent with Yardley's (2008) recommendation to consider the reasons why particular views may be expressed, and allowing this issue to be contemplated is seen to add to the study's transparency and reflexivity. In addition, the awareness of the issue meant that, consistent with the approach of Newton et al (2007), I was able to respond by explaining that negative aspects of the art group were equally as useful as positive ones.

By engaging with the participants, I was able to answer any questions that arose and, importantly, was also able to allow members to indicate or select a time during the session when it was suitable for them to take part. For some people, this meant talking to the researcher before they commenced any art work, thereby minimising interruption to their session. For others, taking time to do some artwork before talking to the researcher allowed them time to 'settle' before taking part in an interview. Overall, the flexibility of the data collection approach meant that participants were given the opportunity to take part in the research at a time that was most convenient for them and that caused minimal interruption to their participation in the art group.

### ***Second interviews:***

Due to the time that had elapsed between first and second interviews, I re-introduced myself into the art group context by attending an 'away day' where members undertook art-work within a donkey sanctuary. No data collection took place at this time; instead, I spent time becoming re-acquainted with the group and asked permission to speak to members a second time at a later date. This was an opportunity to explain, in an informal way, the purpose of the second interviews and to maintain the gradual and sensitive approach to data collection that had worked well in the first interviews. In accordance with ethics procedures, the interview information sheets were also distributed so that members could take time

to consider their participation before I attended the art group for the second interviews.

The purpose of the second interviews enabling a fuller exploration of interesting themes found in the first interviews was fully explained to participants. This was given emphasis in discussions with art group members after feedback from the Scottish IPA group that an invitation to take part in a second interview could engender a misconception in participants that they had given 'wrong' or incomplete answers in the first interview.

In the second interviews, rapport was re-established quickly and there was less work to be done in gaining trust and developing interpersonal contact. The quality of data collection is surmised to have been maximised in the sense that participants appeared to 'open-up' more readily than in the first interviews. This is consistent with Flowers (2008, p 26) discussion paper where the advantages of second interviewing are said to "maximise the opportunity for trust and rapport to be established....and foster repeated opportunities for disclosure to occur."

### **Responses of participants**

Overall, participants were able to respond coherently to the questions asked, but probing fuller answers was often problematic. In some instances, it was necessary to guide the participant 'back on track' both in relation to the topic and in relation to the interview itself when participants would often leave the interview setting without warning. A few of the participants mentioned medication side-effects for difficulty in concentrating on the questions for any length of time. Participants took many breaks during the interviews and were encouraged to indicate when a rest was needed or when they would rather draw the interview to a close. As Smith et al (2003) highlight, research participants in general can have difficulty in expressing what they are thinking and feeling, as well as grappling with decisions whether to self-disclose for various reasons. It can be argued that difficulties are more pronounced with mental health groups, with important learning points to be gained from studies who have similar related in data collection. Sensitivity in communication, rapport-building and flexibility during interviews were essential elements to successful data collection. The ability to allow time for unforeseen distractions seemed to contribute positively to the rapport that was built up with participants.

The use of a two-stage interview also seemed to be conducive to obtaining adequate responses from participants. Due to problems with concentration, an in-depth single interview would have proven laborious to participants. The use of multiple interviews in addressing issues of attentional capacity, however, is not well documented. In the limited generic IPA literature that use two interviews (e.g. Eatough et al, 2008), the rationale for the approach is related only to the premise of

researcher opportunity for clarification and further exploration. Clare (2003), for example, provides a rationale for using a two-stage approach to interview people with Alzheimer's that is related only to the opportunity for further probing (i.e. researcher factors). Similarly, Jahoda & Markova (2004) use two interviews with participants with intellectual disabilities, but a rationale is not provided.

The advantage of a two-stage interview process, in terms of both the depth of data gathered and ethical considerations in respect of participants' concentration difficulties, can be seen to outweigh the possible complications that multiple interviews are said to bring; namely, the premise that the epistemological position is made complex by that multiple interviews transcending a person's construction of experience at more than one point in time (Flowers, 2008). It is possible that perception and construction of meaning over time changed between interviews and it is acknowledged that the participants' experience of taking part in the first interviews may have resulted in an altered sense of their art group experience. This can be likened to therapeutic approaches where the fundamental process of talking about an experience can alter a person's view of it. As is later reflected, participant's accounts of their experience appeared, however, remained relatively stable between interviews. In addition, their ability to verbalise responses to questions was consistent; however, there were notable changes in mood, which, presumably, would affect the account given. The difference in time-points and possible changes that occurred, however, is not considered problematic within an IPA perspective. Phenomenology assumes that "perception varies according to the context, the position of the perceiver in relation the object, and the mood of the perceiver. This means that there is no "once and for all knowledge," and so the issue of 'when' data collection took place is only important for reflecting on the ways in which contextual factors may affect the perspectives given (Langdrige, 2007).

## **Appendix 4: First Interviews - Interview schedule\***

### **A. General overview of participation**

- 1) How long have you been coming to the art group?
- 2) Had you taken part in any art activities before you started coming to this group?

### **Perceptions of attendance**

- 3) What, if anything, do you get out of coming to the art group?
- 4) Do you think that coming to the group has changed anything for you?
- 5) Did you have any goals in mind, or things that you wanted to achieve, when you started the art sessions? If 'yes,' what are they? Have you achieved them?

### **Perceptions of the sessions**

- 6) How do you feel about the time that you spend in the art sessions?
- 7) What do you like most about the sessions?
- 8) Is there anything about the sessions that you dislike or would change?

### **Additional Comments**

Is there anything else that you would like to say about the art sessions?

*\* A semi-structured approach to interviewing expands on these questions in line with individual responses and explores further areas that may emerge during the interview.*

## Appendix 5: Second Interviews – Interview Schedule\*

### Feelings of Achievement

**1)** Some people feel that taking part in the art group gives them a sense of achievement. Do you find that?

*(If yes, explore – e.g. In what ways? What makes you feel like that? Can you give me some examples?)*

**2)** In what ways, if any, has this feeling affected your life outside of the art group?

*(If other areas talked about, explore – e.g. Can you give me some examples? Is it taking part in the art group that makes you feel like that or are there other things in your life that have made you feel a sense of achievement?)*

*(If none, explore – e.g. Is it only at the art group that you feel this way?)*

### Praise and Confidence

**3)** Feelings of confidence were also talked about when people were asked about taking part in the art group. Has your confidence been affected do you think?

*(If yes, explore – e.g. in what ways? What makes you feel like that? (explore praise) Can you give me some examples?)*

**4)** In what ways, if any, has having more confidence had on your life outside of the art group?

*(If other areas talked about, explore – e.g. Can you give me some examples? Is it taking part in the art group that makes you feel like that or are there other areas of your life that have affected your confidence?)*

*(If none, explore – e.g. Is it only at the art group that you feel this way?)*

### Social benefits

**5)** Another finding from last time was that people enjoy social benefits of coming to the art group, for example they get the chance to meet their friends or it makes them feel less alone. Does that apply to you?

*(If yes, explore – e.g. in what ways? What makes you feel like that? Can you give me some examples?)*

**6)** In what ways, if any, have the social benefits of the art group had an affect on your life in general, outside of the art group?

*(If other areas talked about, explore – e.g. Can you give me some examples? Is it only at the art group that you experience these benefits or are there other areas of your life where you can socialise?)*

*(If none, explore – e.g. Is it only at the art group that you feel this way?)*

### **Feeling accepted**

**7)** People also talked about feelings of being accepted and being able to 'be as themselves' at the art group. What do you understand by that?

*(If applicable, explore – e.g. in what ways? What makes you feel like that? Can you give me some examples of how this affects you?)*

**8)** In what ways, if any, have those feelings of acceptance had on your life outside of the art group?

*(If other areas talked about, explore – e.g. Can you give me some examples? Is it taking part in the art group that you feel this way or are there other areas of your life that you feel accepted and able to be yourself?)*

*(If none, explore – e.g. Is it only at the art group that you feel this way?)*

### **Future Goals**

**9)** Some people now seem to have future plans for their art-work. Do you have any goals in mind in relation to your artwork?

*(If yes, explore – e.g. What kinds of goals? Where did they come from? Can you give me some examples?)*

**10)** In what ways, if any, has having goals and plans had an effect on the rest of your life?

*(If other goals or effects of goals talked about, explore – e.g. Can you give me some examples? Was it taking part in the art group that made you set goals in other areas of life or was there other aspects of life that changed this for you?)*

*(If no, explore – e.g. Is it only goals in relation to the art that you have?)*

*\* A semi-structured approach to interviewing expands on these questions in line with individual responses and explores further areas that may emerge during the interview.*

## Appendix 6: Divergence in art group experience

The process of art group experience, as outlined in chapter 4, represents collective meanings that were shared in a way that could be represented as a general overview of process. Throughout the thematic representation of findings, however, are various idiosyncrasies that show how shared notions of experience, when analysed in-depth, can be unpicked to reveal interpretations that are divergent in terms of individual meaning. IPA allowed these divergences to be explored and represented within shared themes. Although not representative of every individual divergent meaning with themes, the following section aims to capture the main areas where interesting individual meanings enriched the understanding of art group experience as a shared phenomenon.

A key point on which participants differed in their accounts of art group experience was the way in which they either focused on what the art group gave *freedom from* or what it *added*. Whilst the former angle was about perceptions of the art group in terms of its difference with the 'outside world,' the latter was focused inwards on the characteristics of the group. At times, participants talked about the art group in both ways; however, there were notable themes where there was a clear division. In data on the processes and impacts of having *freedom to be*, for example, Kate and Keith spoke about the art group as a buffer against experiences of social exclusion and stigma in life outside of the art group; whilst, perhaps on the other side of the same coin, Doug and Geraldine spoke about the art group opening up shared lines of communication and the potential for developing friendship. In this sense, Doug and Geraldine focused on the sense of commonality at the group, whereas Kate and Keith pointed out the lack of a sense of commonality in life outside of the art group.

A difference in the angle from which participants perceived a similar aspect of art group experience was also evident within the theme *freedom to be* when both Sheena and Geraldine were interpreted to value group *acceptance of the changeable self*. For Sheena, the individual meaning of this theme was about the ability to emotionally express the way that she was feeling, and for these emotional expressions, e.g. crying, to be accepted and normalized by the group. For Geraldine, however, it was the freedom to *not* express the way that she was feeling that held the most meaning. Having personal control over the expression of feelings was therefore significant to both participants but in individualized ways. For Sheena, it was a freedom to express, whereas for Geraldine it was freedom from the pressure to express.

At times, it was clear that describing the art group in terms of what it gave *freedom from* was easier to articulate, given that participants were attempting to describe what was interpreted to be aspects of group culture. Articulating such an abstract phenomenon appeared to be facilitated by making contrasts between the art group and other walks of life. Although this was also interpreted to be their way of



underscoring the uniqueness of the art group culture, it appeared to allow participants to convey their experience with more conceptual clarity.

Individual differences were also found to be most apparent in relation to the concept of the art group as a safe space, which was found to be related to two different themes; *buffers against social exclusion and stigma* (within the major theme of *freedom to be*) and *confidence within the group and as a bridge to other things* (within the major theme of *confidence*). In *buffers against social exclusion and stigma*, it was interpreted that Kate conceptualized the art group as a place of safety due her mental health problems not being stigmatized in the way that she experienced in life outside of the art group. Within the same theme, however, Keith was found to perceive the art group as a safe space to interact with friends who had mental health problems. Outside of the art group, and without the general support of charity workers, Keith had experienced challenges in responding to the mental health difficulties of others, whilst, at the same time, reporting that he chose to only be friends with those with mental health problems. Therefore, in addition to acting as a buffer for general social exclusion and stigma in everyday life, the safety of the art group, for Keith, also meant having the support to engage with his friends; presumably further enhancing his ability to cope with a lack of friendship in non-mental health contexts.

In the theme, *confidence with the group and as a bridge to other things*, individual differences about the safety of the art group were related to whether they valued the ability to use the group as a 'bridge' or not. Whereas Geraldine and Kate conceptualized the art group as a safe core from which to try branching out into other groups, the meaning of safety, for Keith, was about the ability to engage in the art group without any expectation to 'move on.' Later in the theme *emerging goals*, however, it was found that Keith saw the art group as giving him the potential for personal growth in terms of moving into an academic field with his art. Rather than being interpreted as a contradictory perspective, this insight affected the interpretation of Keith's conceptualization of the art group as a safe space; rather than it being a place where he could engage in art without moving onto other things, it was the ability to have the *choice* of whether to move onto other things, or not, that was meaningful for Keith. In this sense, the art group could be used as a bridge into dimensions of personal growth, or it could be simply enjoyed without any pressure to develop. Again, a fundamental freedom from the expectation of others allowed the art group to be flexibly used in accordance with personal choice and self-direction.

Related to using the art group as a bridge, the displaying of artwork through art exhibitions also held meanings that were individually specific even although there was a collective value placed on exhibiting art. Exhibiting artwork was key to three major themes within the superordinate theme of *personal growth*; firstly, within the theme of *confidence*, the exhibiting of artwork within general art exhibitions acted as bridging mechanism (for Geraldine) between the art group and the outside

world. Exhibitions also acted as a bridge, for Geraldine, between the past and present in allowing her to realise that she could undertake some activities that she used to routinely engage in (in *abilities and skills*). Thirdly, the exhibiting of artwork acted as something to aim for (for both Geraldine and Keith in *emerging goals*) and was seen as evidence of graduating to an ultimate stage of personal growth with art. When taken together, the conceptualization of exhibitions as a bridging mechanism in two different ways and as an objective for personal growth shows the multi-dimensional and individual ways in which participants can interpret an activity that holds a shared value. Whereas Geraldine placed most emphasis on the bridging mechanism of exhibitions, Keith only saw exhibitions as a goal. Furthermore, the bridging mechanism of exhibitions linked art group experience to the past (previous abilities) and present (moving into non-mental health contexts) for Geraldine, whereas exhibitions as a goal linked art group experience with the future for Keith.